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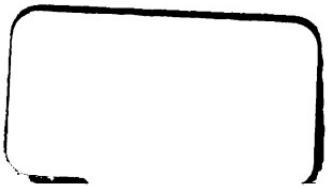
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HOURS
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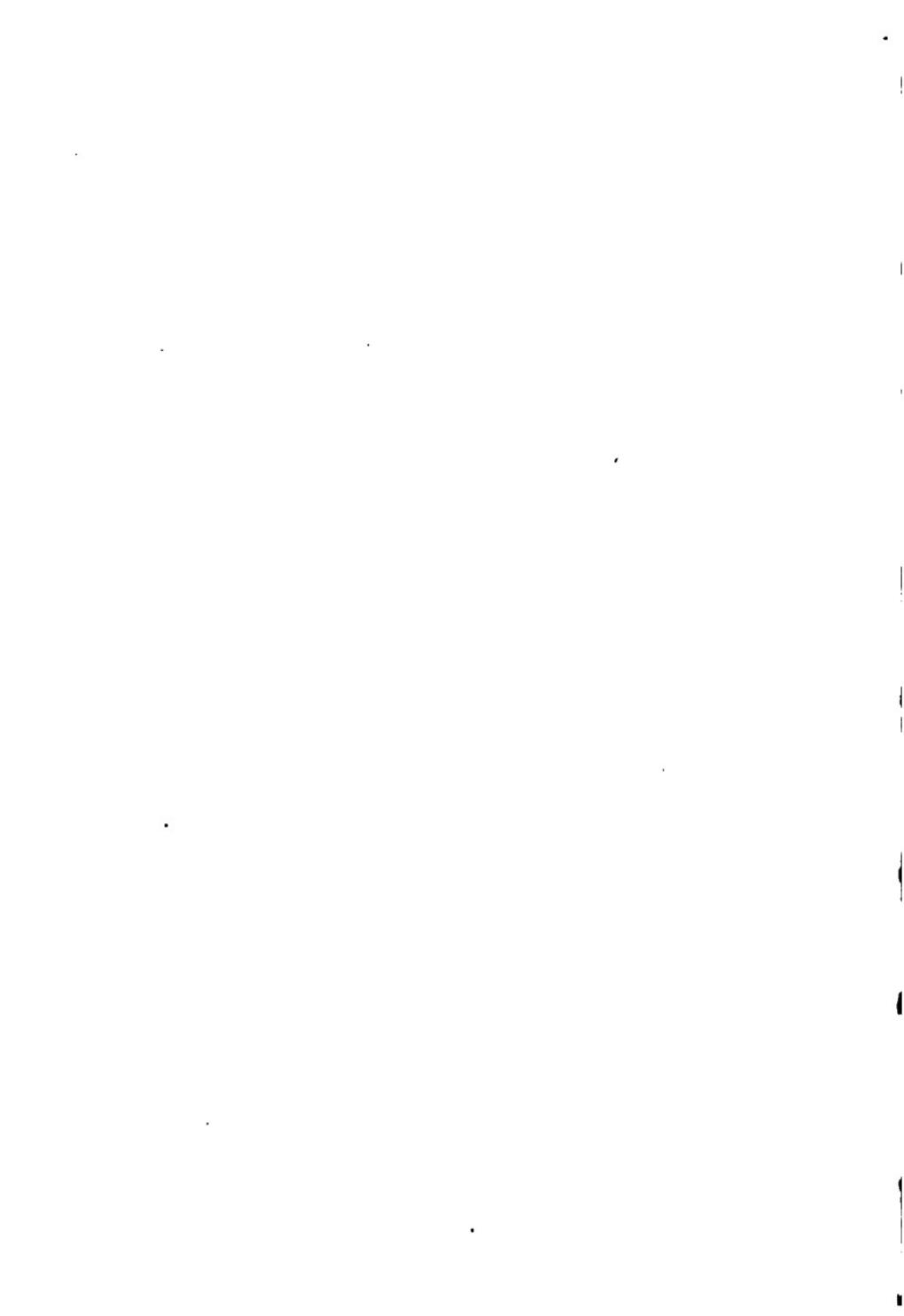
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THE STRONG HOURS



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THE STRONG HOURS

By

MAUD DIVER

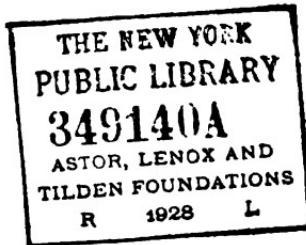
AUTHOR OF "CAPTAIN DESMOND, V.C.", "DES-
MOND'S DAUGHTER," "UNCONQUERED," ETC.



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ARMY WOMAN
OLIGUR
VRAJELI

TO
THE MEMORY OF MY OLD FRIEND AND CRITIC
JOHN SCOTT STOKES

In early years he was Secretary and Librarian to John Henry Newman; and from contact with that great Englishman he acquired his delicate sense of what is genuine in Literature, his rare knowledge of English letters, which was ever at the service of his intimate friends, among whom I was proud to be numbered. For many years a member of the Savage Club, it was there — through my father — that he came into personal touch with my early work. From that time forward, he was my most constant reader, my most devoted, yet candid, critic; and my debt to him, in every way, is far greater than this small tribute can adequately express.

M. D.

“His spirit's meat
Was freedom; and his staff was wrought
Of strength; and his cloak woven of thought.”

SWINBURNE

“In a mighty matter, and bearing many ways, to
judge with unswayed mind, this is a hard essay; yet
hath some ordinance of immortals given this sea-
defended land to be to strangers out of every clime
a pillar built of God.”

PINDAR

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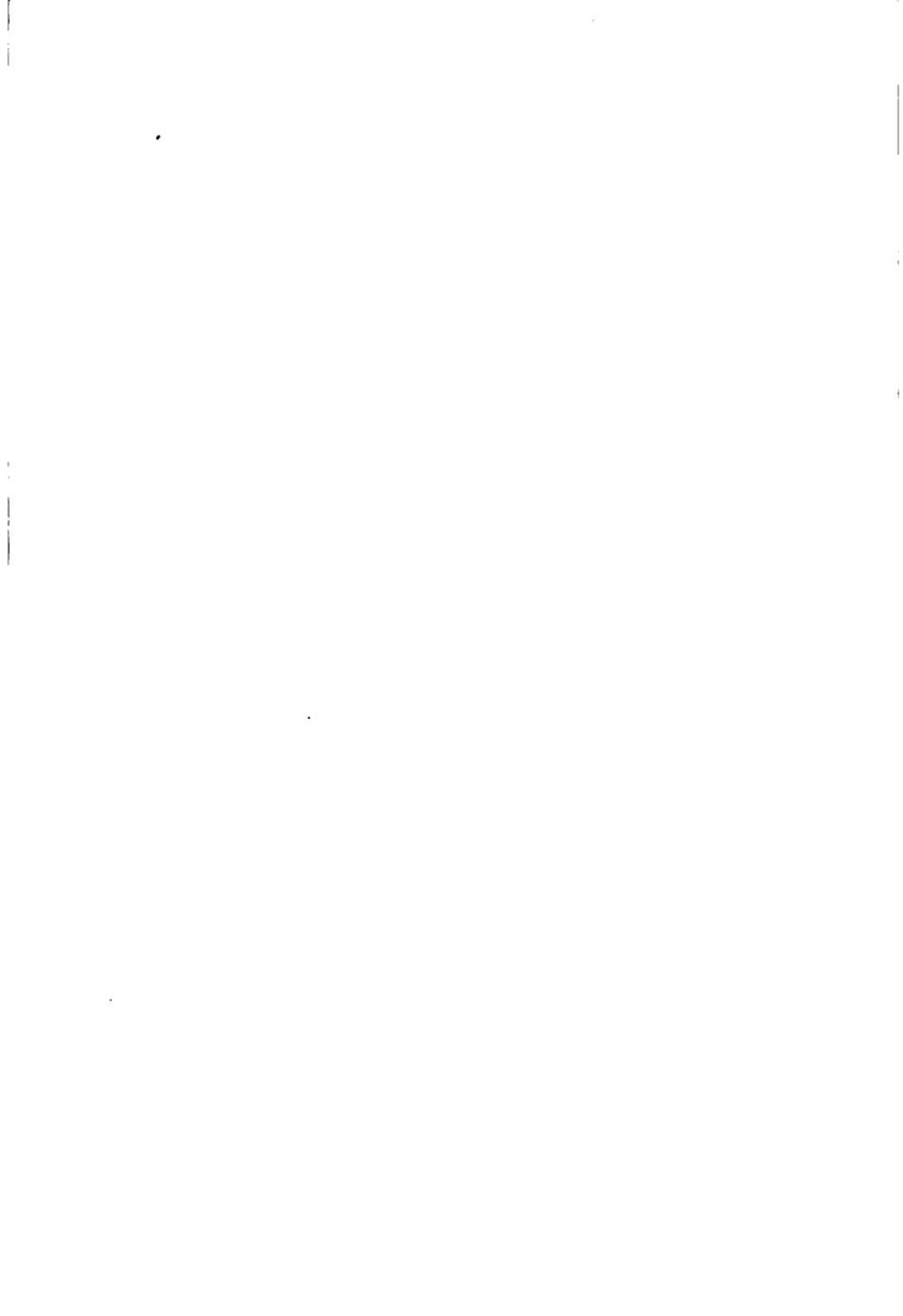
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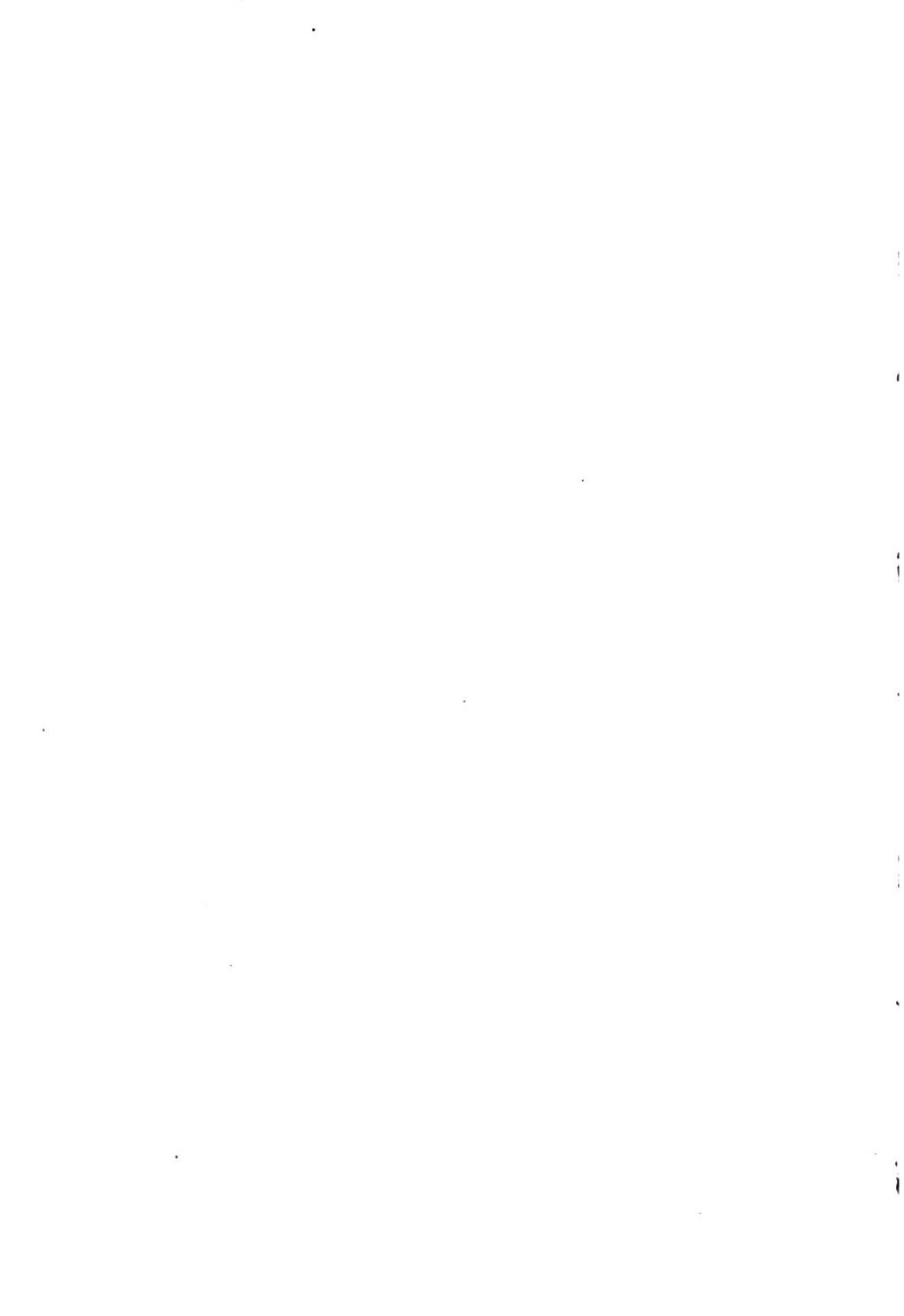
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THE STRONG HOURS

PROLOGUE
ONE MERE DAY



THE STRONG HOURS

PROLOGUE ONE MERE DAY

CHAPTER I

The cruellest lies are often told in silence.

R. L. S.

THE April sun shone full upon the easterly windows of Avonleigh Hall, transfiguring the stern, grizzled face of the house, where Blounts of Avonleigh had lived and died since the days of Cœur de Lion; caressing it with light and warmth, as a child caresses the face of an old man to make him smile and play at being young again.

And the house responded after its kind. Its rough stones looked a few shades less sombre than usual. Golden and wine-coloured leaf-buds gleamed, half-open, on the thorny traceries of the Gloire de Dijon that framed the three tall windows of Lady Avonleigh's morning room. Under the low, broad ledge daffodils made stars and splashes of brightness; and the centuries-old lawn, across the gravel pathway, was gay with grape hyacinth and blue scilla. The breeze brought a whiff of fresh-cut grass and a mowing machine purred steadily somewhere out of sight. The sun — that, for all his million years, alone possesses the secret of immortal youth — was luring the whole world to play at being young again on that radiant spring morning.

Suddenly there broke upon the stillness a patter of scurrying feet followed by the vision of a slim sturdy figure, in a brown jersey suit, that dashed out of the shrubbery and sped along the gravel path toward the house. Faster and faster it sped;

shoulders squared, head flung back, hair flying, the small blunt-featured face set in resolute lines. At eight years old it is a very serious matter to be a smuggler, caught red-handed, fleeing for dear life from the clutches of Outraged Authority; and Derek was always terribly in earnest over the game of the moment.

He had a fair start of Authority in the person of a tall boy in flannel shirt and trousers, who came loping after him with long strides. This was young Evan Trevanyon Blount, heir of Avonleigh; — a lordly schoolboy, with a soul above childish games, and not given to being terribly in earnest over anything. He had revived the smuggler drama — an invention of old standing — because he had nothing better to do and because it mildly amused him to work Derek up over it and give the youngster a pommelling. Not that he had an ounce of the bully in his nature; but it had been rubbed into him at school that his own early sufferings were entirely for his good: and it occurred to him that Derek might as well have a little benefit of that kind in advance. It enlivened the holidays and it didn't hurt the 'kid.'

His long legs were gaining steadily, now, on the short ones ahead of him; and Derek could feel his heart beating all over his body. As he came level with the morning-room windows a wild inspiration flashed through him. If he could touch wood it was 'sanctuary.' That was one of the unwritten laws of the game. With a sudden swerve to the right, and a flying leap, he landed on the broad window-sill — breathless, but safe.

There he stood in full sunlight, clutching the woodwork with one very square brown hand; his resolute lower lip thrust out; his eyes screwed up against the glare so that they almost vanished under the thick straight line of his brows — a sufficiently engaging picture of half-nervous defiance to soften any heart but that of a brother who was simply enjoying the joke.

"You can't touch me *now*, Van. Yah! — I'm sanctuary!" he cried as the older boy stood regarding him out of a pair of cool grey eyes.

"Can't I?" Van drawled, looking him up and down with the air of an ogre mentally scrunching the bones of his pre-

destined prey. It was a horrid moment for Derek; but his faith in Van was absolute and he stood his ground.

"You know you can't — on your honour," he retorted with an out-thrust of his chin; and, confident in security, the tip of a tongue appeared between his teeth. The joy it was, and the relief, even for a few moments to be master of the situation! Yet, come what might in the way of retribution, he would rather be the smuggler than Outraged Authority any day.

"Well, as to that," Van answered suavely, "*you* can't stand hanging on to the window frame forever; and when I do get at you I'll scalp you extra for your cheek. I'm in no hurry. I can wait!"

And seating himself on the grass, hands clasped round his knees, he proceeded to stare his small brother out of countenance.

As a mere game this was well enough and Derek could brazen it out with the best. But he was not playing a game. He was acting a thrilling drama. It was not Van who sat there staring at him. It was Authority, waiting to pounce on him, to inflict punishment, merciless and condign. He had been 'scalped' once this morning, without the extra, and had no ambition to repeat the experience. The joy of mastery had been brief indeed. He could not have explained why, but he felt ensnared; held fast by those immovable eyes. Queer small sensations began to creep down his spine. Stubborn though he was by nature, and no coward, he began to wonder how much longer he could hold out.

A bold attempt to spring clear of Van and dash off again seemed his only chance of salvation. But though he had regained his breath a little, he frankly shirked the risk and the terror of it. Still — even if things were hopeless he was not going to let himself be tamely caught; he, Dirk of the Red Hand, the terror of the country-side! As mere Derek Blount he had no business to be standing there with muddy boots on the window-sill of his mother's morning room. If she or any one else came in, an undignified scolding would be his portion. He hovered, in very truth, between the devil and the deep sea.

The only alternative to a daring outward leap was sudden and swift retreat through the room behind and up the wide staircase to the schoolroom; for, according to the old rule of the game, if he could reach the schoolroom unscathed he was entitled to free pardon. Both the morning room and the staircase were forbidden ground and the mud of the shrubbery was on his boots. But the element of risk made retreat seem less ignominious; and the small person on the window-ledge had a good deal of pride in him, though he had not yet learnt to call it by that name.

Almost before Van was aware of it, he had taken a backward leap and was making for the door, fortified by a desperate resolve to lock it behind him.

Van, a punctilious person, lost a few seconds by hurriedly wiping his shoes on the grass. But he could be swift-footed when he chose and the Kid's unexpected move had revived the excitement of pursuit.

Halfway across the room he pounced on Derek and pinioned him in a grasp that was firmly unyielding.

"Now then, young 'un, you may as well throw up the sponge," he said with his slight drawl. "Give in with a good grace and it'll be the better for you."

"Shan't!" Derek flashed out furiously, and fought like a wild thing so far as his imprisoned elbows would allow.

He was hopelessly at a disadvantage, but pride and temper were now thoroughly aroused. He cared nothing for the result. He would die fighting. Foot by foot Van dragged his struggling victim back towards the window.

"Give over, you little fool, and come out of this. We've no business in here, you know," he said at last, by way of bringing the boy to his senses.

There was no answer. For a moment Derek ceased to struggle; and Van — who disliked all undue exertion — slightly relaxed his grip.

It was enough. With a fierce unexpected twist, Derek freed himself and fled behind a table on which stood a tall Satsuma vase.

"Pax — I'm safe!" he panted, clutching 'wood' with both hands.

But this time Van was angry — a rare event.

"You deliberately hoaxed me, you little devil. Nothing'll save you now."

With due caution he slipped a long arm half round the table. Derek jerked himself away, still clinging to it, and giving it so sharp a tilt that the vase fell crashing to the ground.

Disaster brought them to their senses. The game was forgotten in face of a reality that filled them both with dismay.

Derek stood motionless gazing at the murdered treasure. Tears pricked his eyeballs. Apart from fear of consequences, he felt — as always — a queer pang at sight of any newly broken object. He was also thinking ruefully that 'things' always went against him. If it was possible to get himself into trouble he never missed the chance. But this was a terribly serious business; only the knowledge that Van shared the responsibility gave him any hope that justice might be tempered with mercy.

Dimly, through the confusion in his brain, he heard his brother remark with quiet emphasis: "Well — you've jolly well done for yourself *this* time"; saw him retreat towards the window; wondered, with a mental shiver, must they "go and tell . . ."

Then the door of the room opened and their mother stood before them, very tall and slender in a grey gown with a flounce that trailed upon the ground lending her added height and dignity. One saw at a glance whence Van derived his natural grace, his good looks and his cool grey eyes.

"Boys! What's the meaning of this?" she exclaimed, looking from one to the other — Van, placid and detached, half seated on the window-sill; Derek with flushed cheeks and bright eyes, obviously guilty, standing by the slaughtered vase.

The sharp note of reproach in her voice struck at his heart. In a swift impulse of remorse he ran to her, unmindful of muddy boots upon her trailing gown — they trailed copiously that year — and, being Derek, he promptly stumbled on a hidden foot.

Before a contrite word could be spoken, he found himself

being scolded for clumsiness, his besetting fault. The words he had meant to speak fled from his brain. The injured toe and muddied flounce aggravated Lady Avonleigh's vexation at his original offence; and there were tell-tale marks on the carpet.

"Really, Derek, I don't know what to *do* with you," she concluded with a sigh of weary impatience. "You don't even try to improve. Direct disobedience to orders and my valuable vase smashed — "

"C-can't it be mended?" the boy stammered, gulping down his tears.

"It doesn't look much like it," his mother answered, unmoved. "And it wouldn't be the same thing if it could. Besides — you've no business to be in here at all. You know that perfectly well."

"I — er — I didn't really *mean* to come in here," Derek plunged — in a desperate attempt at self-defence. "It was a game . . . and Van — I — "

He broke off, too loyal to implicate his brother, taking it for granted that Van would help him out and shoulder his share of the disaster.

Van, however, still sat there in the window swinging one leg, looking distressed and sympathetic, but entirely aloof. And in response to Derek's appealing glance he said never a word. Nor did his mother dream of questioning him. In her eyes Van was sacrosanct. He could not possibly have any connection with breakages and mud-marks on the carpet. Things of that kind were Derek's specialities; and they kept Lady Avonleigh in a chronic, half-despairing state of annoyance with her younger boy, who seemed to have nothing of herself in his composition.

Van's silence fell on Derek's heart like a stone. It took him several seconds to grasp all it implied; and while he floundered in stormy depths of bewilderment and protest, his mother stood awaiting further explanation, looking down upon her small son with curiously little of sympathy or understanding in her heart. It is to be feared that, just then, the broken vase affected her more than the child's very evident confusion and remorse.

"Well, Derek?" she said at last.

"I — I can't prop'ly explain. I'm sorry," he muttered without looking up: and it is just possible that Van felt faintly remorseful when he perceived that Derek — though a mere kid — knew well how to play the game. But the meshes of his own silence entangled him. He could not, now, free himself without risk of falling in his mother's esteem, a risk he was not prepared to take for the pluckiest kid in creation.

And Derek's pluck was undeniable. Outwardly stoical, inwardly raging, he accepted the rest of his scolding and his sentence of punishment in a silence that simply appeared sullen and tended to aggravate his sin. It was hard on Derek, who never sulked, that his face, in moments of intense gravity, had a distinctly sulky look.

He would be in disgrace for the rest of the day, his mother told him in her low even voice, which, to Derek, always sounded beautiful, even when pronouncing judgment. He would not come down to the dining-room for lunch. He was to stay alone in the schoolroom all the afternoon; have tea there by himself and go to bed at six. He would not be locked in. He was simply put on his honour. At least Lady Avonleigh did not make the mistake of distrusting this troublesome rebel of her own creating.

"But of course," she concluded sternly, "no mere punishment can make up for the loss of my beautiful vase — a piece of rare old Japanese china —"

This was too much for Derek's feelings. "You can take *all* the three-pennies out of my money-box, there's quite a lot there now," he murmured in a desperate rush that failed to hide the quiver in his voice.

That unconscious and pathetic touch of humour might well have disarmed a sterner monitor; but Lady Avonleigh — unhappily for herself and others — was almost impervious to humour. She merely saw, in Derek's offer, the first real sign of remorse; and her voice was a shade gentler as she said with becoming gravity: "My dear child, I wouldn't dream of such a thing. Besides, it would be useless, and I think you are being

THE STRONG HOURS

sufficiently punished as it is. Now go upstairs, and if you want me to believe you are sorry, try — for once — to do exactly what you are told."

That 'for once' hurt Derek like the flick of a whip. With one glance in Van's direction, he went out of the room — no longer Dirk the Red-Handed, but just a discomfited small boy, smarting under the sting of injustice and his brother's utterly unexpected desertion.

CHAPTER II

She who slays, is she who bears — who bears.

ALICE MEYNELL

ALONE up in the schoolroom, he shut the door upon himself with a sort of tragic deliberation, and scrambled on to the low polished oak cupboard that ran round the bay window, forming a wide seat. There, huddled together, knees drawn up to his chin, he bowed his forehead on them and cried, hot passionate tears that seemed as if they would never come to an end: tears for the broken vase, for his mother's distress, for the discovery that Van, his hero, could be cowardly and mean like any ordinary mortal; and not least for his own persistent ill-luck and the severe punishment meted out to him for an accidental sin.

To do Lady Avonleigh justice, she had too little imagination to realize how harsh was her sentence of imprisonment for a creature of eight years old, on a day of April sun and wind. But for Derek, the real tragedy of that eventful morning was Van's behaviour. By flagrant disregard of the unwritten law, he had been indirectly responsible for the disaster; and, in the face of that — to let another bear all the blame! . . .

Loyal little soul that he was, Derek would never have believed it possible. He could scarcely believe it now, except for the fact that his own sensations at the moment were too painfully vivid to be forgotten — or readily forgiven.

Nor was he alone in this exalted view of his elder brother. Faith in young Evan Blount was part of the Avonleigh creed. The entire household revolved round him, as planets round the sun. True, there were heretics among them; notably Malcolin — Viscount Avonleigh's land agent — and Mrs. Consbigh, the housekeeper; but, being wise in their generation, they revolved with the rest and kept their heresy to themselves.

Mrs. Consbigh, it is true, made no secret of her devotion to Master Derek: and she accepted — as part of the boy's inherent masculinity — the fact that her motherly kindness evoked curiously little response.

It did not occur to her that the surreptitious affection she lavished on him emphasized all that was lacking in his mother's rare and coveted caresses. Naturally it did not occur to Derek either. He felt it simply — with a child's vague, unerring instinct for matters of the heart — as one of the many bewildering things in life that somehow hurt you and you couldn't tell why. There were moods, as he grew older, when he almost hated the good woman who gave him, out of her large-hearted abundance, that which he craved from his mother and from no one else on earth.

And to-day, as the first passion of grief subsided into long, shivering sobs, the fear crept in that, when she heard of his disgrace, she would seek him out and try to comfort him. But in the main his thoughts circled round Van, his shattered idol, who would never again be perfect in his eyes. Probably, if he cared enough, Van would manage to patch things up in his persuasive fashion: but dimly Derek knew that within himself something had been broken that morning quite as precious as his mother's vase and as impossible to mend. . . .

A turn of the door handle brought back the dread of Mrs. Consbigh. Hoping she would think he was asleep, he did not stir or lift his head. Then with a shock — half amazement, half anger — he realized that it was Van. Still he did not move. What right had Van, after basely deserting him, to come and gloat over his misery? He wished now that he had locked himself in.

Van paid no heed to his silent rebuff, but came straight to the window-seat; and the next moment Derek felt his thick shock of hair being lightly towseled and rubbed 'every which way' by Van's long fingers. Derek set his teeth and remained motionless. He did not understand that Van, by coming to him, was implicitly confessing himself in the wrong.

"I'm scalping you! I told you I would!" he said at last in

his gentlest voice, so like his mother's that it went straight to Derek's heart. But, in his childish fashion, he was inflexible. His emotions did not easily flare up or readily subside. Van — being pre-eminently flexible — had come too soon.

"Oh — *go away!*" was all the reponse he received in a voice of muffled misery, and Derek jerked his head ungraciously from under those caressing fingers that could neither reach nor heal his hidden wound.

Van drew himself up. "Thanks," he said coolly. "I think it was jolly decent of me to come. But you're the most obstinate little beggar in creation. If you weren't, all this would never have happened. You *deserved* it — for hoaxing me. I just did it to punish you."

That had been Van's excuse to himself for a slip out of the straight path that had, in point of fact, been simply instinctive: and it was significant of the vital difference between the brothers, that the elder could not, or would not see — what the younger vaguely felt — that any reference to his own deserts was altogether wide of the mark.

"Oh, Van" — he flung up his head in sheer desperation, and pushed back the dark hair from his forehead — "that's not fair — you can't — just because of me. If I'm obstinate, you can hammer me. But you can't . . . break rules and . . . sort of . . . half tell lies . . ."

It was a lifelong drawback for Derek that he could never call a spade an agricultural implement: and at that ill-judged word Van drew himself up sharply, a queer glint in his eyes.

"Confound your cheek!" he said; he was rather proud of the new swear. "D'you think I came here to be lectured by a chit of an infant like you? I just came to cheer you up because you got rather more than you bargained for; but I shan't trouble to come again, and I wish you joy of your own company for the whole afternoon." But as he turned to go a thought struck him. "You don't go blabbing about this, mind — to old Con or Ina."

Ina was the sister who came between them.

"Course not," Derek retorted with scornful emphasis. "I wouldn't tell any one — never!"

The patent sincerity of that asseveration softened the flexible Van. "You're a game little beggar, Derek," he said with his drawl. Then after a thoughtful investigation of his pockets. "Have some choc. Give you something to do."

He proffered a whole stick of Suchard. Such unwonted generosity might have savoured of bribery but for Derek's proud confidence that Van did not doubt his word. Probably the elder boy himself hardly realized that his impulse, like his visit, was prompted by an uneasy conscience.

In any case, a stick of Suchard was irresistible. It could comfort if it could not heal. Derek held out his hand. "Thank you, Van," he said gravely.

Van deposited his peace offering, and for a moment his fingers closed over Derek's open palm.

"You're too much in earnest over things, little 'un,'" he said lightly. "You must get the better of that or you'll have a rotten time at school."

And Derek was left alone to digest, at leisure, that sagacious piece of advice.

The upper housemaid, who had removed the fragments from the morning room, brought him his lunch. Her attempt to convey mute sympathy was baulked by Derek, who looked steadily out of the window till he heard the door close behind her.

Mrs. Consbigh appeared later with an offering of dried figs, and was not to be evaded by such simple means. Besides—Derek had a pronounced weakness for dried figs, as the good soul very well knew. She was a spacious, deep-breasted woman, with a frame as large as her heart and a rather gruff voice that was a sore trial to her because it 'went against' her with children; a natural-born mother of men, which could not be said of her mistress.

"In trouble again, are you, my lamb?" she greeted him, essaying a sympathetic note that only made her voice sound huskier than ever. "Well, well, we're all mortal, and accidents *do* happen to the best of us. You take it like a man an' the worst'll soon be over."

Derek nodded — quite unconvinced. For him the five hours that loomed between dinner and bedtime seemed an eternity. But if Mrs. Consbigh's philosophy was unconvincing, her figs were a very present help in trouble. Derek privately resolved to eke them out as long as possible by taking small bites and counting his 'chews' like a certain famous old gentleman whose name he had forgotten.

"I oughtn't to have them, you know," he murmured with his mouth full. "Because — it was very bad. It can't be mended, Mother said."

Mrs. Consbigh sighed. "Ah, that's a pity. Still — there's lots of things broken in this world, without intention, that can't be mended; more vallible, too, than a vawse. You'll learn that, my pretty, one o' these days."

This time Derek's nod was charged with conviction and a touch of tragic self-importance; but he consoled himself with another bite of his fig.

Mrs. Consbigh lingered, reluctant to leave him. She strolled towards the window and stood looking out. Derek watched her uneasily. She ought not to be there. Solitary confinement was his sentence, and he was to try and do, 'for once,' exactly what he had been told. Also she was interfering with the plan to count his 'chews.'

"How long have you to stay here?" she asked suddenly, and Derek's face clouded. He resented the painful question.

"Till six o'clock. And then — I'm to go to bed."

Mrs. Consbigh stifled something that sounded like "Horrid shame!" Aloud, she said again — "It'll soon be over. Have you got a nice tale to read?"

"I've got my Hans Andersen." A pause. Derek grew still more uneasy: and at last he spoke.

"Please, Mrs. Con . . . I'm afraid you mustn't be here. Mother would be vexed. I've got to stay quite alone and . . . do what I'm told."

That was too much for Mrs. Consbigh. She turned and swept towards him.

"Oh, *bless* your little heart!" And to his unspeakable amaze-

ment — faintly tinged with wrath — she flung her arms round him and kissed the top of his head.

"*You* shan't get into any further trouble through your old Con. But I'll bring you something for tea," she assured him, as she went out.

With the help of the figs and the chocolate and Hans Andersen the interminable afternoon dragged itself to an end. The garden below him was full of sunshine and song; but the world seemed utterly empty of people. Van, having salved his conscience with a gift, had gone out riding with his father; and not even an under-gardener came within Derek's range of vision. He tried to fancy he was Dirk the Red-Handed, in gaol, looking out for his accomplice to help him to escape. But the game had quite lost its hold on him. He felt he would never want to play it again. . . .

At tea-time Mrs. Consbigh reappeared with two sugared cakes. But on this occasion she did not linger: nor did she outrage his dignity by further caresses.

Punctually at six, the young governess who taught him and Ina came and fetched him to bed. When that melancholy rite was over, she shut out the friendly daylight with blinds and curtains and left him with the pious hope that he would be a 'better boy to-morrow.'

She was not sympathetic. He disliked and defied her; and she had endured a good deal at his hands. He was very thankful to be rid of her; in spite of the fact that being left alone in the dark, horribly wide-awake, was the worst part of his punishment.

Who — except a dog — could be expected to go to sleep at six o'clock?

In the hope of inducing weariness, he screwed up his eyes tight; because the sooner sleep came, the sooner it would be to-morrow. But after five minutes of vigorous screwing he only felt more wide awake than before. Evidently sleep could not be wooed; it must be waited for. And as he lay there waiting, a faint hope crept into his heart that perhaps his mother might come up to tell him he was forgiven, and then he could say

properly how sorry he had been all along. It would be easier in the dark if she was holding his hand. And supposing she did come . . . and found him asleep —!

The fear of that calamity banished all attempts to coax weariness. He lay strained and tense, his eyes wide open, his ears alert to catch the first sound of her footsteps: while she, downstairs, sat in her favourite arm-chair, by the freshly lit fire, reading a novel.

She had been writing letters till after six; and in signing the last but one, a vague idea of going up to see Derek had crossed her mind. She was not one of those mothers who make a regular rule of the good-night function either from duty or from a natural impulse of love. Only with her first-born it had been a matter of course; and when he grew too old for it, she became careless; simply followed the mood.

To-night, for obvious reasons, Derek had intruded once or twice upon her thoughts. After all, he had been punished severely and had taken it well. Hence the impulse to go up and see him. But that last letter had driven it from her mind, and the sight of her novel lying open at a critical point in the tale, had completed her oblivion of the troublesome small son, who was so curiously like his Scottish grandmother that at times he scarcely seemed her own.

Half an hour later, in a pause at the end of a chapter, she suddenly remembered him again. Perhaps the intensity of his longing found its way, by some mysterious process, into her brain.

She glanced at the clock and suffered a passing twinge of self-reproach. "Too late now," she decided, half sorry, half relieved; for she was very comfortable and not strong and she hated stairs. He probably had not expected her, and by now he would be fast asleep. Not for a moment did she suppose that the morning's disaster had made any deep impression on him. He was not sensitive like her dear Van —

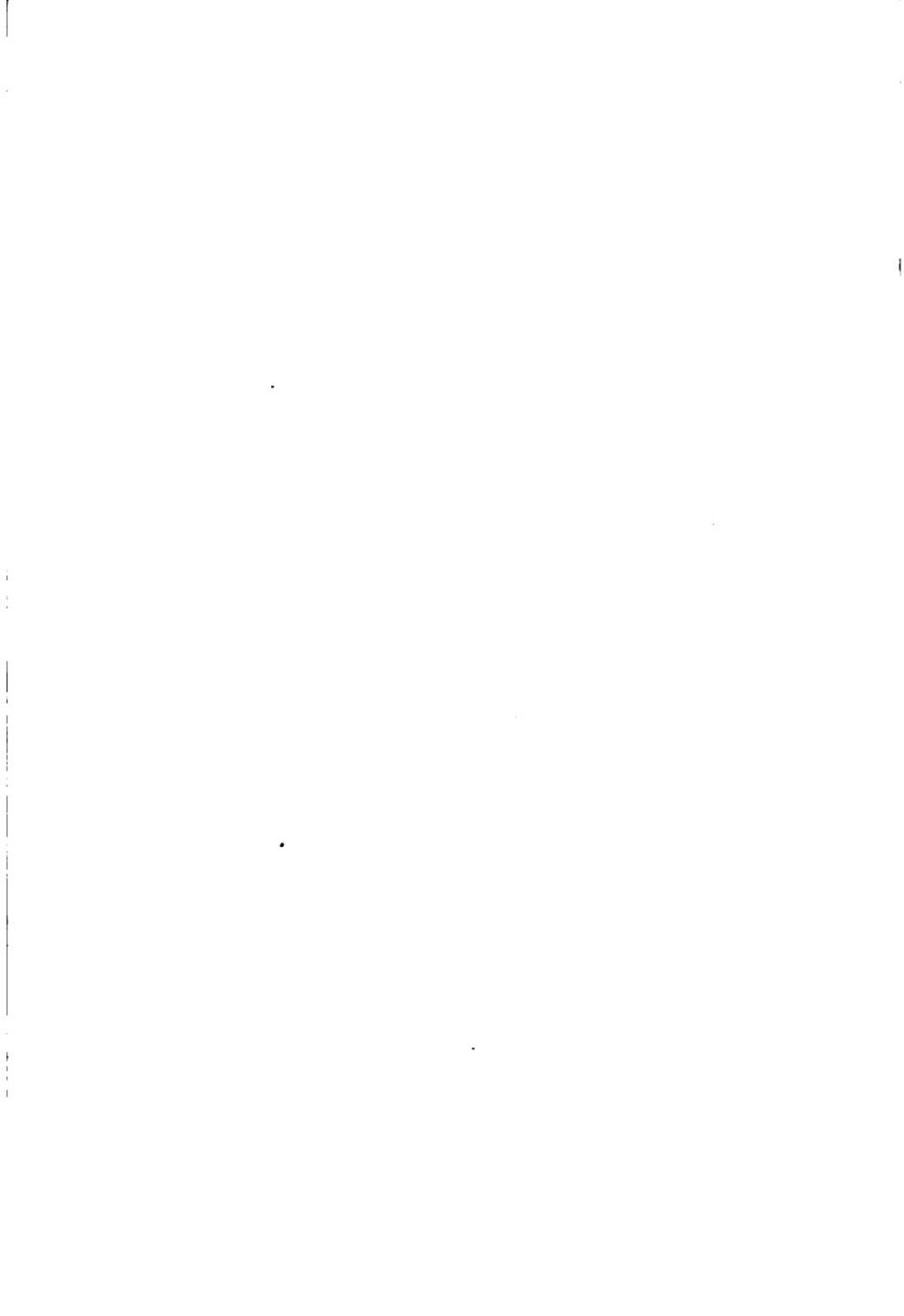
And she went on reading till it was time to dress for dinner.

Derek — still lying tense and alert — heard the tap-tap of her heels when she reached the polished first-floor landing and

his heart thumped jerkily in expectation. But the sound retreated — then ceased abruptly, and he knew he was either forgotten or not forgiven —

A feeling of utter loneliness swept through him. He longed to spring out of bed and run down to her room and pour out all that was in his heart. But she was so much a goddess, so little a mother to him, that he did not dare. Instead he found sobs coming thick and fast. Too proud to let them be heard, he burrowed under the bedclothes, stuffed the sheet into his mouth, and, when passion had subsided, quietly cried himself to sleep.

BOOK I
BEYOND THE SKYLINE



BOOK I BEYOND THE SKYLINE

CHAPTER I

*Deep in the man sits fast his fate,
To mould his fortunes, mean or great :
Or say, the foresight that awaits
Is the same genius that creates.*

EMERSON

It was a mild, blustering afternoon of September; the face of the sky moody and variable like the face of a spoilt child. Clouds scuttled across the blue, and a sharp squall of rain dashed petulantly against the windows of the Southampton express. Before the burst of temper was well over, the sun flashed through a rift and away across the heather there sprang a rainbow.

Bright against lowering clouds, it melted away into a pine-wood that gloomed between moor and sky. The whole spacious landscape throbbed with light and colour. Nature, in her most enchanting mood, seemed challenging that train-load of human restlessness to be unaware of her surpassing beauty. But for the most part their eyes were holden, from habit, or glued to the printed page.

Happily there are always exceptions. One of them, on this occasion, was a young man who occupied the corner seat of a second-class carriage. His appearance proclaimed him a devotee of the road. The grey-green Norfolk coat, though of good parentage, was shabby to a degree. The pockets bulged, the elbows were rubbed, and a leather button was missing. Worse still, its air of well-bred vagabondage clashed outrageously with a pair of new grey flannels very viley cut, without even a waistcoat to modify the effect. Of these distressful details the wearer seemed serenely oblivious; and that trifling

fact bespoke breeding as plainly as the repose of his square sunburnt hands bespoke strength. His face was noticeable, without any claim to good looks. There was latent power in the modelling of the broad brow and dark, uncovered head; in the blunt nose and slightly aggressive lower lip. But it was the eyes — clear and direct under eave-like brows — that caught the attention even of casual observers; so that those who looked once were apt to turn and look again.

For the face of that ill-dressed young Englishman was still, in essence, the face of the boy who had stood in the morning room window, some fourteen years ago, defying Outraged Authority to the knife. In detail, certain lines of character had been emphasized and the soft contours of childhood chiselled away. His eyebrows made a thicker smudge across his forehead. His nose was more definitely square at the tip; the dent between mouth and chin was sharper, the jaw more clearly defined. The face still looked a little sullen in repose; still lit up astonishingly when he smiled; and he was altogether the old Derek in his attitude towards those accidental flannels which, until they could be remedied, could at least be ignored.

For the most part he devoted his attention to the window and sat perfectly still, absorbed in the passing scene. The fact that he had just returned from a nine weeks' pilgrimage on the Continent made him more alive than usual to the beauties of his own land on this day of peculiarly English mutability. From the moment suburbs loosened their strangle-hold on the country, and disfigured Surrey shook herself free from encroaching hordes, he had discarded *Punch* in favor of pinewoods, orange-tawny gravel pits and amethystine sweeps of ling in full bloom. Later, came emerald sweeps of meadow-land; hawthorn hedges bright with ripening berries; a farm or two, a townlet and a golf course. Then more heath and pinewoods, as the express dashed through the wild waste region round Aldershot, the scene of countless mimic battles, bloodless victories, and invasions repelled —

For Derek — fresh from the stark grandeur of the Dolomites and the oleographic brilliance of Switzerland in summer — the charm of the whole misty shifting landscape was summed up in

one word — England. What a mellow, friendly land it was! No harsh lines, no sharpness of contrast, even where moor and meadow kissed each other. A lazy, slow-moving, comfort-loving land? Yes — on the surface. Derek frankly admitted the common cry of England's detractors; and remembering the well-tilled fields of France, he added, on his own account — an unproductive land: tragically so, for the country-side, that is the true England; dangerously so, perhaps — ?

And where lay the blame? Derek, with the enviable assurance of youth, had his answer ready to hand — Free Trade and the Industrial Vote. As the younger son of a peer, whose belief in the land was no barren faith apart from works, he had been reared in close touch with its deliberately neglected problems. Talk at Avonleigh often turned upon the subject; and Derek was a born listener. Things heard left a deep impression on his eager brain: and now, while it travelled along these familiar lines, his attention was, for the first time, arrested by the Industrial Vote incarnate that flaunted its bank account, so to speak, under his challenging gaze.

Directly opposite him sat a stout woman, expensively upholstered, clutching a restless Pekinese and quieting it, at intervals, with macaroons. A purple 'lancer' feather careened high above her hat; and her plump feet were mercilessly compressed into smart patent leather shoes. Beyond her more frankly expansive husband, sat two young men of much the same genus: one lean and pasty, the other fleshy and pasty. Both were fitfully studying the columns of a leading Radical journal. Both bore the stamp of the counter on their neat persons, featureless features and disjointed chaff with a couple of girls opposite, who were sharing a box of chocolates and the doubtful wit of 'Society Chatter.'

To Derek, with the country-side on his brain, that chance handful of town products strikingly presented the other side of the shield. These, and hundreds like them, were the gifts of Industrialism to England. That they and their kind might increase and multiply, the town was sitting every year more heavily on the country's chest . . .

At this point he checked a certain tendency to lapse into the leading article vein; the dire result of being very young and very much in earnest: and it was then that he discovered the girl in the far corner, next to the fleshy and pasty young man.

There was nothing very conspicuous about her, except her conspicuous unlikeness to the others. Her gloved hands were folded on a book; and as she looked persistently out of the window he had little more than a profile view of her face. Not exactly pretty, was his first thought; but emboldened by her absorption, he looked again. She had moved a little now. Her eyes were lifted watching a mass of luminous cloud — a riot of high lights and ink-grey shadow — that sailed lordly in the blue. His impulse to look again had no connection with such obvious items as a small straight nose, forehead and brows tenderly curved, or the touch of childlike wonder that lightened her serious eyes. It was something about her whole aspect; something clear and swift and confident without a shadow of complacence. Contrasted with the three full-blown specimens of middle-class womanhood, she seemed a creature of another sphere. She wore everything, to her very gloves, with a difference; and the colour in her cheeks was not the wild-rose bloom of England, but the deeper carmine of the south.

"No industrial bank-book there!" thought Derek; and a moment later he was jerked violently forward, almost into the stout lady's arms. The train had stopped with a jar that quivered through all its amazed and startled occupants. The next station was still miles away. Every one sprang up. The young men emitted pious interjections; the stout lady, clutching her treasure, rushed panic-stricken to the farther window; hers being blocked by Derek's head and shoulders.

All along the line a score or so of other heads were shot out: but their owners discovered nothing beyond a few mildly astonished cows and an agitated guard, doing his official best to temper agitation with dignity.

"I say, guard, what's the row?" Derek demanded when the man came within earshot.

"Some one's pulled the alarm chain, sir," was all the answer

he got, as the badged and belted one hurried past anticipating murder or outrage at the very least.

"Alarm chain," Derek informed his fellow passengers over his shoulder.

As he spoke, his attention was attracted by a bareheaded sailor, three windows down, very young and very pink with repressed excitement.

"Please, sir, 'twas me," the boy called out eagerly to the approaching guard.

"Well — *where's* the bloke? Out with him. Look sharp. She's five minutes over time —"

"Please, sir — there ain't no bloke." The boy's voice was a shade less confident. "It's the wind that done it. I were just a-takin' a squint at the old country and it snatched me cap clean off, it did. A brand-new cap it was, sir," he added feelingly, as the guard's expression awakened a dim sense of the enormity he had committed — and anti-climax was complete.

Shouts of laughter rippled along the train. But to the guard it was no matter for mirth that the sacred Southampton express should be held up by an infantile blue-jacket who had lost his cap. In scathing terms he explained to that preposterous infant that the London and South Western Company did not stop their trains for his private convenience. "And maybe you 'aven't 'appened to notice," he concluded with fatherly concern, "that there's a trifle of five pounds penalty for this sort of practical joke. Who's yer 'atter?"

The boy's colour ebbed and his jaw fell. He had noticed nothing, in that moment of distraction, except the providential chain. He was home on first leave since joining his ship, he explained with woefully diminished confidence. And no self-respecting sailor could knock around the town bareheaded. And the cap was brand-new. And he hadn't stopped to think.

"Well, if you stop to jaw now, sonny, you'll lose the lot," the man interposed in a kindlier tone. "Nip out and back like a lightning streak, or you'll have to leg it —"

But the infant was already legging it for dear life, cheered as he went by sympathetic third-class passengers.

In the twinkling of an eye he was back again, the costly cap jammed down to his eyebrows; and what breath remained in his body was completely taken away by the discovery that a miraculous, shabby-looking 'gent' had dropped from heaven, placated the guard and relieved him of that staggering fine into the bargain.

His mumbled attempt at thanks was nipped in the bud by a gruff, "All right, old chap. Don't fuss," from the boy of another world who was only a few years his senior; and before he sprang on to the step he flung a daring question at the guard.

"Please, sir, 'oo is he, sir?"

"He's the Hon'able Derek Blount, son o' Lord Avonleigh of these parts. You're in luck, young stiver. Nip up. She's *ten* minutes over time now, thanks to you."

Derek, meanwhile, had seen the magic word 'smoking' on the window next his own. He decided to enjoy a pipe and rescue his belongings at Elverstone: but as he grasped the door handle, he found himself hailed from his own carriage by a clear feminine voice.

"Oh, Mr. Blount, you're the very person I want to see! Do please come back."

That amazing invitation came from the girl who was different. He had seen her leaning out while he settled matters with the guard. There was no time for surprise or argument. The guard had raised his flag and swung himself on to the train. It started with a jerk just as Derek transferred his grasp to the next door handle and sprang in — mystified exceedingly and not a little vexed at being deprived of his pipe.

He found her sitting opposite him, a little flushed, her eyes alight.

"I must apologize," she said, speaking rather rapidly, without a trace of shyness. "But I heard your name. I'm Jack's step-sister — so you'll understand."

His mystification evaporated. Jack Burlton had been the companion of his trip.

"Oh, then you are Gabrielle — Miss de Vigne?" he said, puzzled and a little awkwardly.

"Yes — I'm Gabrielle," she answered, smiling: and fresh perplexity assailed him.

"But why are you here? I thought he was meeting you in town."

"So did he, poor dear! It's very distracting, but it couldn't be helped. You changed your dates, you see, and my French-Canadian cousins in Brittany wired that I must join them sooner —"

"I say — you're actually . . . off, now — to Canada?" Derek broke in. Concern for Jack put shyness to flight.

"Practically off."

"And Jack's clean missed you? I'm awfully sorry. I'm afraid it's partly my fault —"

"I'm afraid it is!" she agreed sweetly. "But please don't distress yourself. He'll get across before I sail. I've left a letter with instructions."

Her smiling friendliness and her intimate connection with Jack made him almost forget she was a stranger and a charming girl to boot. He usually admired the last from a very respectful distance: but this one was already known to him as "Gay," the daughter of Jack's dead mother by her first husband. Jack, who had no sisters, was devoted to her; and Derek's twinge of self-reproach on his friend's account, helped him to forgive her for depriving him of a smoke. If he did not answer her last remark it was only because the counter-jumpers and 'Society Chatter' young women embarrassed him by staring frankly and giggling over some joke that might or might not be connected with Miss de Vigne's unorthodox behaviour. He confounded their impertinence. Why on earth couldn't a girl obey a natural impulse without becoming a butt for their third-rate humour? Rather than cater for their amusement he sat silent, gazing abstractedly out at scurrying trees and fields, recalling the keen-edged joy of life reduced to its simplest elements. . . .

Very soon they all became bored and returned to their papers.

The young woman next to him shut her eyes and seemed to fall asleep; and Derek was just beginning to hanker for his pipe when the girl's head lolled sideways, lower and lower. He glanced at it apprehensively and edged nearer the window. Miss de Vigne's eyes caught him in the act and they smiled.

"It *is* odd," she remarked, "our meeting like this, when Jack's plans have never come off."

"My fault again!" he admitted frankly. "I've always funk'd Commem. Not my line."

There was a moment of silence; then, with a tentative note in her voice, she asked: "Did you merely tramp the country? Or did you try and get at the peasants — the people, out there?"

"Oh, we tried — after a fashion — in Public School German! But we weren't fooling round on a 'better understanding' mission, if that's what you mean?"

"You sound rather scornful. Have you no faith in them?" she asked, an anxious crease between her brows.

Derek shook his head. "Not a shred of faith. I don't say we're not sincere, or the French either. But the sincerity is as one-sided as the sort of bargains that spring from it. Look at the Bagdad line —" Suddenly he became aware of her distress. "Have you been reared to think otherwise?" he asked in a changed voice.

"To *hope* otherwise," she answered, her colour rising a little. "You see — Jack's father has a lot of German friends and business connections," she went on, turning her face away from inquisitive eyes. "He thinks very highly of some; too highly, I'm afraid. In fact, that's the chief thing I wanted to see Jack about, and — why I spoke to you. All this summer, the Schonbergs, especially, have been getting more and more friendly, and — it bothers me. All that's most French in me distrusts that man by instinct. Dad — Mr. Burlton — says it's simply prejudice. He may be right; but still —" She was silent a moment, gazing out over the wide sweep of open country, her small even teeth compressing her lip. Then with a quick turn of her head she looked round again and said lightly: "I don't know why I'm boring you like this!"

Derek wrinkled his brows: "Does it worry Jack too?"

"Badly."

"Odd he's never mentioned it. Shall I say anything to him?"

"Yes — do. It'll ease his mind, now he hasn't got me to ease it on!"

Slackening speed warned him they were approaching Elverstone. "I get out here," he said, rising as the train slowed down. He pulled his modest luggage out of the rack, hesitated a moment, then held out his hand. "Good-bye — good luck! It's a great country. And — if I can help in any way — ?"

She sighed. "I don't think any one can — or I wouldn't be leaving England."

Then he sprang on to the platform and stood there a few seconds looking absently after the vanishing train. A quite unexpected adventure that; not at all in his line.

"Car's a bit late, sir," remarked a friendly porter who had known Derek from a boy.

"No car for me, James," he said. "They don't know I'm coming."

"Pleasant surprise, sir, I'm sure," purred the kindly old man. "Get you a fly, sir, from the 'Good Intent'?"

"No, thanks. I'd rather walk. You can freeze on to my rucksack and the bag. Send 'em along by the carrier tomorrow."

He dived into his trouser pocket and brought out a shilling. "All the cash I've got left!" he said; "you're welcome to it," and passed out through the wooden gate into the familiar road that ran, white and smooth, over High Down, through Haddon Wood and Coombe St. Mary's, to Avonleigh Hall. Journeys and adventures were over. He was at home.

CHAPTER II

Between the born adventurer and the community man, there is a great gulf fixed.

TENNYSON JESSE

By this time, the sun definitely had the best of it. A brisk south wind was dispersing the last stragglers of the storm, splashing the uplands of High Down with flying shadows; and away on the crest of the ridge, a coppice of larch and birch tossed plume-like boughs against the sky. On the left, as it were in the shallow dip of a wave, red roofs and hayricks, barns and nibbling sheep basked in the mellow afternoon lights. Derek, steadily breasting the hill, knew by heart every line and curve, every chimney-stack, every lone tree printed darkly upon the sky. It was more to him than a happy conjunction of woods and hills and dwellings. It was part and parcel of his inner life.

From the sunlit ridge he swung down to the village of Coombe St. Mary's, that had dozed unruffled through the centuries, and was not fully awake, even now, to the ominous rumble of machinery in the North.

Already Derek was on his father's land; and here the sense of home struck deeper. More than the average young men of his age and station he had genuinely tried to make friends with those most inexpensive of all human creatures, the born tillers of the soil. Here and there he had succeeded better than he knew; better than any member of his family would have believed possible. For he had a knack of achieving a good deal, while apparently doing nothing in particular: a knack very characteristic of his race.

On the hill above the village he paused and looked back into the sleepy hollow that had already lost the sun. He could see the first of the labourers trailing home from the fields; and,

watching them, he wondered idly which groove, after all, was deeper, more barren of healthy human vagaries — the agricultural ruts of his friends down there, or the narrow way of convention along which his mother and Van moved with such unerring precision? If either of them could have seen him struggling against the mighty current of the Yser, for the sake of a bath and the mere sport of the thing, or crouching naked between two rocks within a few yards of clothed and spectacled propriety —!

He chuckled to himself at thought of the shock it would give them. For it is hardly too much to say that his own people knew almost as little of the real Derek as he himself knew of the real working man. If home relations were not all that they might have been, it was tacitly assumed to be Derek's fault; and, after a period of bitter inward rebellion, he had arrived at supposing they must be right. Of his recent trip abroad he had told them little or nothing. From Oxford he had written that he would devote the long vacation to a walking tour abroad and would probably be home about the middle of September. Since then, a few brief letters to his mother and an occasional postcard had given them a rough idea of his movements; and that was all they knew about it: — all they were ever likely to know.

Sometimes, in a regenerate mood, it pained him to realize how increasingly reticent he had grown about himself and his doings. But his mother's vague, polite inquiries were not calculated to unloose his tongue; and Lord Avonleigh held with Dr. Johnson, that "questioning is not a mode of conversation among gentlemen." As for Van, except in rare moods of expansion, he was frankly bored with most things that did not directly concern himself.

From this it may be gathered that Derek, at two and twenty, was still too square a peg for his very round and polished hole; which is not to say that he undervalued, for a moment, his goodly heritage of fine traditions stretching backward through the centuries. But those very traditions involved certain limitations that tended to hamper his choice of a path in life.

As a younger son, a certain amount of latitude was his; and a fourth year at Oxford was still on the cards. Personally, he was in no hurry for the decisive plunge. No gusty winds of ambition stirred his soul; but he recognized the wisdom of his father's insistence on a definite occupation for Van and a definite profession for himself.

Already his supposed indecision had caused a certain amount of home friction. Lord Avonleigh had failed to divine the cause; and Derek himself had signally failed to convey any impression of his complicated state of mind. Now, after three months, presumably devoted to consideration of his future, decisions would be expected of him — and they would not be forthcoming.

That consideration cooled, a little, the glow of welcome in his heart when the ivy-mantled pillars and wrought-iron gateway came into view. A narrower entrance near the lodge stood open: but Derek — suddenly conscious of his own shabbiness — passed it by. Skirting the stone wall, he entered the Park through an iron-studded door, beloved from boyhood for its mediæval flavour. It opened on a narrow path that meandered up through the rising sweep of land and finally struck into the drive, between dense ten-foot hedges of yew, close to the house itself.

Derek sauntered leisurely through that scattered company of great and ancient trees: oaks with their far-flung boughs; beeches with boles like grey satin and cascades of incomparable leafage sweeping almost to the ground. Often and often, when the hands of all the world seemed against him, a small lonely Derek had stolen away to his favourite beech tree, as to a sanctuary. There, perched in the fork of a friendly bough, where the wrath of man could not come at him, he had shed his 'insect miseries' and found courage to return to the dusty arena of the nursery and the schoolroom; the dense stupidity of grown-ups who either could not or would not understand. Derek was a catholic lover of trees; but the beeches stood first in his heart.

The level sun struck shafts of light through them and

stretched out to interminable lengths their prodigies of shade. In the distance he sighted a herd of deer ambling down to the lake; and the little wind that had chilled the glow within him died away. He felt suddenly eager to see them all again — especially his mother. Absence invariably quickened his deep, natural feeling for her; and he had never quite discovered why it evaporated so strangely after the first few days at home —

Emerging from between high walls of yew, he came full upon the house — a stately stone façade with mullioned windows and a square tower in the left wing. Ivy grew thick on the tower; and across the whole wide front spread the tentacles of a giant wistaria; its plume-like foliage softening the severities of the stern old place.

Without entering the house, he passed through the conservatory — aglow with chrysanthemums — on to the main lawn, where three friendly cedars made a continent of shadow. The lawn itself swept on, innocent of impudent flower-beds, down to the winding lake. Beyond the lake, the sweep of two wooded hills framed a vision of blue distance darkly clear against the storm-swept sky.

Under the cedars were small tables and garden chairs. Between two low boughs a hammock was slung; and in the hammock Evan Blount sprawled at ease. One faultlessly flannelled leg hung over the edge revealing a glimpse of silk sock above a white tennis shoe. On a table at his elbow stood a cut-glass jug and tumbler, a box of chocolates and the remains of two peaches. His head, deep in a cushion, was hidden from view; but an ascending plume of cigarette smoke showed that he was not asleep.

Derek's footsteps made no sound on the turf; and he had just reached the shadow of the trees when Van, turning to flick the ash from his cigarette, was confronted by his brother's powerful, ill-dressed figure.

As in boyhood, so in manhood, these two sons of one mother were astonishingly unalike. Van, the taller by several inches, had all the grace and pliability that Derek conspicuously lacked. He was still good-looking in a quite unaggressive way. He had

sleek mouse-coloured hair, regular features and a good-tempered mouth, under a carefully cherished moustache, the colour of ripe corn. The cut of his flannels was irreproachable and the tint of his socks was repeated in the butterfly bow of his tie. Inside and out he was the finished product of his age and type.

"Hullo! *There* you are," was his brotherly greeting. "The parents were wondering at lunch when you would deign to let them know if you were still on terms with this mortal coil — and all that —" He had raised himself on one elbow and at this point his brows went up a fraction of an inch — "Great Scott! where the deuce did you pick up those unholy garments?"

"At Munich," Derek answered coolly, "from a bland and beery Teutonic gentleman, who prided himself on his English cut!"

Van laughed — a pleasant lazy laugh that matched his voice and person. "About as English as the cut of the Wilhelmstrasse! But why patronize a gentleman of that persuasion? What was the desperate stroke of Fate —?"

Derek paused a moment. The unholy garments had fairly given him away, and the fact that Van would not in the least understand made the tone of his explanation almost aggressively cool.

"Fact is, an enterprising Italian navvy relieved me of my only pair — at our last halting place outside civilization. Nothing for it but to tramp on to Munich in Jack's shabby old Burberry and knickerbocker stockings — on a blazing hot day and the Wagner Festival in full swing! You can fancy Jack enjoyed that part of the joke better than I did."

Van chuckled.

"Upon my soul, Dirks, you're the limit. For the honour of Avonleigh, Father ought not to let you run round on the loose except under a *nom de plume!* As for Mother! . . . Lucky it's her Cottage Hospital afternoon: so you can get rid of your trophies before she sets eyes on you. The shock might bring on a heart attack!"

It was the first chilling whiff of home atmosphere and it checked Derek's expansive mood.

"Just the sort of thing I *would* do—eh?" he said in a changed voice.

"Rot! I was only ragging you. But the poor dear's had one jolt already to-day. At breakfast, Father calmly announced that he had an urgent letter from old Wyntown offering him the Governorship of Bombay. Fareham's crumpled up with the climate and they want to relieve him as soon as possible. Father's up in town about it now."

Derek let out his breath in a low whistle. "I suppose that means he'll be going soon—and Mother?"

Van lifted his eyebrows. "She hasn't said much, but I can see it's shaken her a bit." He paused and chose a particular shape of chocolate that contained his favourite cream. "Hard luck on her that you should have chosen this particular day to drop out of the blue without a word of warning. Knowing her little weaknesses, old chap, you might have favoured her with some sort of intimation—"

Derek jerked up his head. "Damn! Never occurred to me. Fact is"—he flung out the truth that rankled—"my coming and going seem to make no great odds to any one. However—lucky she's out. I can easily take myself off again. Tramp over to Ashbourne. Put up at the Avonleigh Arms and write to-night announcing the *precise* moment of my arrival—"

"My good idiot, you'll do nothing of the sort," Van struck in with drawling emphasis. "I merely submit the rational suggestion that you make yourself scarce—when you've *quite done* with my chocs. Then I can break the news to her with due tact . . ."

"Thanks, very much. I'll spare you the trouble." He rose abruptly, almost oversetting the small table. "Another five miles won't hurt me. I'm in topping form—"

"You look it!" Van's smile had its patronizing quality. From the superior height of six and twenty, he regarded his young brother's whole behaviour as flagrantly juvenile. "All the same—it's ludicrous—farcical."

"*I* can't help that—" The obvious reflection on their mother checked further comment.

Van shrugged and gave it up. "Oh, well — if you *will* be a fool —"

"I'm not being a fool. I'm considering Mother—in my own way. I'll go on through the woods over Burnt Hill; and I'll pinch the rest of your chocs to keep me going. Many guests this week-end? I've asked Jack to keep me in countenance."

"And I've asked Karl. Ina's bringing her recently annexed K. C. Father mentioned Cointe d'Estelles and Sir Eldred Lenox with the plain daughter. Women as plain as that ought to be painlessly extinguished at a tender age!"

"Van, you're a beast! You and your pretty women!" He put on his cap. "Well — I'm off. See you all to-morrow."

Van merely waved his hand, but the distressful view of his brother's retreating figure spurred him to a final effort on his behalf.

"I say, Derek," he called out, and the boy swung round in his stride. "For God's sake, don't appear again in those Teutonic atrocities. I'll post you a decent pair to-night."

Derek grimaced. "Thanks awfully. Sorry they gave you a shock." And very soon a curve of the hill hid him from view.

Van heaved a sigh of relief, lit a fresh cigarette and resumed his placid contemplation of cedar branches, enamelled with turquoise where the sky gleamed through. He was just pleasantly tired. He wanted no more human eruptions. Derek was queer. A thorough good chap at bottom; but in the ordinary way of life confoundedly uncomfortable. What the deuce did a man in his position want with tramping round Europe in shabby clothes, like any seedy schoolmaster? When a man had a beautiful home and the best houses open to him for shooting and fishing, why this deplorable craze for bemusing himself with the other fellow's point of view?

From certain remarks Derek occasionally let fall, he gathered that this was one of the mainsprings of his brother's superfluous activities, but from his own higher vantage point, he clearly perceived the futility of it all. The sense of status was very strong in Van. Even at Derek's age, he had never wasted his time or energy in worrying about the man on the other side of

the hedge. A fellow didn't need to be a 'crusted Conservative' to resent the vagaries of the 'social conscience' crew. Personally Van counted himself a Liberal of the cultured, theoretical, peace-loving order. A taste for ready-made views and values was of the essence of his character, and his interests, like his activities, travelled within the prescribed limits of his own particular circle in London and his own insignificant niche in the Government machine. When Lord Avonleigh wisely insisted on some definite form of occupation, Van — a Londoner at heart — had dutifully acquiesced in a decree that gave him an excuse to live in the only city on earth. For two years now, he had been Private Secretary to a distinguished member of the Foreign Office. He believed in Sir Edward Grey as the prince of pacifists, and in the divine right of every man to go his own way, so long as he refrained from treading on his neighbour's toes. He also believed in a friendly Germany and the financial impossibility of a European war. These were distinctly comforting convictions, which was perhaps the main reason why they found favour in his eyes.

It was Derek's chief failing that he could not or would not accept the face value of men and things. He had too much of the Moray element in his composition. It might be very admirable, but it made him rather a doubtful blessing to his family. Van thanked Heaven that he himself bore the impress of his very English mother. He also reflected without conscious pharisaism, that for the honour of Avonleigh — which was genuinely dear to him — Fate had done well to bring him first into the world. Upon which satisfying conclusion he presently fell asleep.

CHAPTER III

One near one is too far.

BROWNING

*I want no opiates,
I want to be co-equal with their fates . . .
I want to be awake and know; — not stand
And stare at waving of a conjuror's wand.*

T. E. BROWN

As for Derek, swinging down the gentle slope towards the lake, he already began to feel half ashamed of his resentment at the idea of having his own casualness thrown into strong relief by an exhibition of Van's consideration for their mother's little fads. Van had a perfect genius for putting him in the wrong; and the fact that he, Derek, had brought it on himself did not mend matters to any extent.

As an isolated incident the thing seemed too trivial for words. But it was not isolated. It was symptomatic of a chronic state of things. And because, at heart, he was angry with himself, Van's characteristic offer had touched him on the raw. For, if Derek was sensitive, he was also proud and stubborn. His temper was of the white-hot order; and his very virtues were tinged with this hidden intensity of spirit. In the deep of his stormy heart, he loved his parents and Avonleigh with a fervour of which his brother was sheerly incapable; and he was secretly jealous of Van — especially as regards their mother. The very fact of her repressive sweetness and graciousness — as of one moving in becalmed regions of the soul — had increased his natural tendency to set her in a place apart. Yet — as far back as he could remember — that healthy boyish impulse of worship had been checked and chilled at every turn. Either through clumsiness, or through his very honesty, he never seemed long out of trouble; and always between him and

his mother stood Van — kindly, easy-going, selfish, with his innate aptitude for saying and doing the right thing.

So it came about that, in this beautiful home of his, surrounded with every physical care and comfort, he had missed the chief need of his nature; vaguely at first, then more acutely as the years went on. And the colour of his past tinged the colour of the future. Temperament and circumstance combined to make him a pessimist in the grain.

This evening as he climbed Burnt Hill, his mood of smouldering antagonism to every one and everything brought back to him, with peculiar vividness, the emotions of that long ago night when he had cried himself to sleep, poor little fool, because he was convinced his mother did not really love him, nor ever would. Scarcely realized by himself — and never to this hour realized by Van — that incident of the broken vase had proved a turning-point in their whole relation. It was the key to much of their underlying discord; their odd alternations of hostility and brotherly allegiance; and it had awakened in Derek the dim beginnings of jealousy in respect of his gentle, soft-mannered mother, who so obviously had eyes for no one but Van. The tacit implication was that whatever he did must be right: and it is scarcely surprising if Derek came to feel, in bitter moments, that whatever *he* did must be wrong. Yet his faith in her had survived — in spite of many jars — till the critical day when first the insincerities and inconsistencies of life and religion had begun to bewilder his soul; and he had so far done violence to his boy's reserve as to make a clean breast of his doubts and difficulties, in the sure conviction that she could not fail to understand . . .

But most completely and tragically she had failed to understand. She had simply been pained and puzzled, like a hen when the duckling she has hatched shows a predilection for the wrong element and wrong farm-yard morsels. He had come to her, hungry and eager, asking for bread: and she, quite unwittingly, had given him a stone. He did not come to her again. But although his belief in her was shaken, his unshakable boy's loyalty remained.

Thus he had grown to manhood in a certain loneliness of heart and spirit, mitigated by the comradeship of school and the fuller, freer human fellowship of Oxford. There was his real life. The impalpable influences of that grave and stately city had lastingly imbued his mind and character; and, as a Blue, he had won some measure of popularity in his own despite. But the chief personal event of those good years at Winchester and Oxford had been his friendship with Mark Forsyth; his natural complement in all things save one — and that the keystone of both characters — a robust sincerity and a hatred of shams. At Wynchcombe Friars he was always happy, always at his ease; though there were moments when the perfect freedom and confidence between Lady Forsyth and her sons hurt him a good deal more than he cared to confess.

During the long pull up Burnt Hill, the unbidden thought intruded: — How different everything would have been had he dropped in there without warning! He rebuked himself for the comparison, but it rankled none the less.

He reached the ridge just before sunset, and, seated on a clump of heather, applied himself to Van's costly chocolates with a will. Hunger apart, he was in no hurry for the stuffy inn parlour of the "Avonleigh Arms." Up here it was spacious and wholesome and silent and there would probably be 'a fine flare-up' after the storm.

By this time he felt almost grateful to Van for having thrust upon him another twenty-four hours of vagabondage — that must be turned to practical account. For, if his father were likely soon to be leaving England, the dreaded interview as to the choice of a profession could not much longer be postponed.

During this last year at Oxford he had considered several possibilities with no very encouraging result. In every direction he found cast-iron systems, a good deal the worse for wear. In every direction ruts and grooves lay in wait for his rebellious feet. Eventually they could claim him. But his immediate craving was for a spell of more independent adventurous movement. He wanted, urgently, to see and feel and think for himself; to tackle life, as it were, with his bare hands. But the

crux of the matter was — how would his father regard that very unorthodox aspiration? He felt the need of some definite programme to mitigate inevitable disapproval —

Meantime if he sat mooning much longer on Burnt Hill he would miss his last chance of a square meal. There was also that note to his mother. He knew himself capable — almost — of walking five miles in order to write it — and forgetting it in the end.

He rose briskly, and stood a moment surveying the wide emptiness of the scene under windy sky dappled with flakes of cloud, that in the west were ignited to flakes of fire.

Burnt Hill, from the summit, commands sweeping views; on one hand, toward the downs and the sea; on the other, across billowing country, toward the pine and heather region round Aldershot. Lord Avonleigh had been tempted often, by offers from the new-made rich, for one of the finest building sites in the neighbourhood. But, although his large estate was heavily hampered, Burnt Hill was sacred; almost a part of his own grounds. Only in one instance had he succumbed; and, as twilight engulfed the valley, the visible sign of that surrender flaunted its naked ugliness upon the skyline, breaking the noble sweep of the ridge.

Derek still resented that impertinent presence, for which Jack's father was mainly responsible. In provocative moods he would allude to it as, "Your family's commercial thumb mark on our holy hill." Its tenant, a solitary man of science, was reputed to be on the track of chemical discoveries that might mean 'a very big thing' for Burlton's, a large old-established metal industry in the Midlands. The whole venture was admittedly a speculation; and Lord Avonleigh — as a prominent shareholder — took a mildly sceptical interest in it: hence his surrender to Burlton's importunity. Their protégé was a shy, inoffensive creature with a damaged lung; and it had been part of the compact that Burlton should secure for him a peaceful retreat, in bracing air, where he could set up laboratories and carry on his work unmolested by the idle curiosity of country neighbours.

That was two years ago, and the Hermit of Burnt Hill was

still pursuing his mysterious researches, apparently without result. Would they ever come to anything, Derek wondered, as he swung down the hill, and justify that hideous excrescence by retrieving Burlton's affairs — ?

Half an hour later he was enjoying a hearty supper in Gosling's parlour behind the bar of the "Avonleigh Arms," with old Tom and young Bert for company, drowning home grievances in a mug of sound English ale.

The elder Gosling — a devoted adherent — beamed all over his broad ugly face, sliced a home-cured ham in his best professional manner and begged leave to crack a bottle of 'fine old crusty' in honour of the occasion.

Bert, just turned twenty, gave no outward sign of sharing his father's satisfaction. He was a shrewd-looking youth, equipped — by the dangerous process of semi-education — with a mass of half-digested knowledge and a flourishing crop of prejudices. His innate distrust of the 'real gentry' was tempered with grudging admiration: the silver-gilt article, rapidly overrunning the earth, he distrusted through and through. He would sell his soul to no 'blooming capitalist' — not if he knew it. Yet — in these degenerate days — what promise of advancement for any self-respecting man on the land? From the horns of this dilemma he had leaped to the one unfailing conclusion — Canada: and he was engaged in the critical process of persuading his father to back his venture with a hundred pounds of capital when Derek appeared on the scene.

The interruption was probably more welcome to the father than to the son, whose respectful but slightly guarded friendliness threw the old man's geniality into stronger relief.

As for Derek — either from sheer perversity, or from larger, hidden causes — he felt no *gêne* here, in this stuffy back room, over-full of photographs and horsehair furniture. With his brain still full of vivid memories, he gave his host a lively account of other inns among the Austrian Highlands, of *al-fresco* suppers, of village bumpkins prancing with local beauties to the tuneful scraping of village violins.

They agreed, all three, in regretting that such homely socialities no longer enlivened the English country-side. Gosling laid the blame with a trowel on the ubiquitous picture-palace, "where folks, too lazy to do nothink else, sits an' gapes like a herd o' penned cattle." But — the interrupted talk with Bert being much on his mind — he could not long keep away from the subject. Though Derek was young, he plainly had a head on his shoulders; and his opinion on the Canada scheme might be worth hearing.

A brief pause, while Bert filled their mugs, gave the old man his chance.

"It *do* be queer, Mr. Derek, how things fall out," he began, turning his bleared blue eyes from one young face to the other. "Just afore you come in, there was Bert and me dead-locked, in a argyment about a notion 'e's set upon; and seems like Providence sent you along at the fizzicological moment — as the noospaper men say — to give us the castin' vote."

Bert's attempt to kick his father under the table merely brought him up against Derek's foot, that was politely withdrawn.

"Beg pardon, sir. A touch o' the cramp," he muttered, reddening; and Gosling babbled on, unhindered, — unaware.

"It's a common tale enough, sir, these days. Here's this boy o' mine can't stomach the town nor fact'ry line o' life no more'n his father; but havin' a better head-piece an' better schoolin', 'e's a bit too ambitious, 'e says, to dump 'isself down on a farm an' stick there."

"Too much ever-an'-ever-amen sort o' business for my taste," objected Bert, still sulky, but determined to get in his oar. "This world's a middlin' big place; an' jest reading about it all seems a rotten okyerpatation for a chap like me. What's the bloomin' use of eyes an' ears, an' trains an' steamers scootin' all over the earth if a man's ter sit chained up like a dog to a kennel all 'is days?"

"There's kennel-dogs as can sniff out a deal o' 'uman nature when the fleas don't keep 'em too busy," rejoined the good-natured old publican with a wink of his watery eye. "But

them that grins an' runs about the city carries their tails higher an' barks the loudest."

"They've more call to — most of 'em." Bert stuck stubbornly to his point. "They git a chance to catch more'n fleas — they do. I'll lay Mr. Derek takes my meanin'. He've just bin runnin' round himself —"

"Now then — no impudence to a son of 'is Lordship!"

The old-time spirit of allegiance — very strong in Gosling — moved his son to a smile, tinged faintly with contempt.

"I hadn't any thought o' such rot: nor I'm sure Mr. Derek hadn't neither." And, as Derek mutely confirmed that assurance, Bert went on: "The likes o' you, sir, can run around just for play-time. The likes of us, if we want to catch more'n fleas (as I said), we've got to take the plunge outright; sink or swim. See?"

"And you want to take the plunge?" Derek asked with quickened interest. "In what direction?"

"Australy or Canada for choice, where a chap can work on the land for a decent livin' wage an' get a chance to rise out o' the rut, if 'e's worth 'is salt. I got a friend out British Columbia way, makin' a good thing of it. Married an' all. 'E says, 'Bring along a bit o' capital an' join in with me.' Dad, here, says 'e's for layin' 'is money on England. I tell 'im 'e'll git twice the return for it out there."

"An' I says old England needs the money an' she needs the men," Gosling lunged in, perceiving Bert's attempt to enlist Derek against him. "An' I say the mighty clever folks that ruined the land wi' their Free Trade tomfoolery do be responsible for this pretty state o' things; that there's more good British money an' men goin' out o' this country every year. An' I call it damned unpatriotic if you ar'st me. I'm none o' yer cosmopolitans — no, thank yer. An' as fer his demikratic twaddle —!" He sniffed scornfully. "That's wot Bert's after. Ole England's not movin' that way fast enough to suit 'is ejcicated taste. I tell 'im they kind can sling the words, easy as winkin'; but all it amounts to is — Pull down the man on top an' stand on 'is 'ead yerself. Pick 'is pockets in the sacred

name o' freedom an' stuff 'is money in yer own! I may be a old fool; kennel-dogs mostly is, 'cordin' to Bert. But it do seem like as we'd most on us be better men — an' better off, maybe — if all sorts 'ud 'ave a good old try at pullin' together, 'stead o' pullin' every which ways to once, an' scratchin' each other's eyes out, between whiles, for rekereation —"

That word lit a spark in Bert's shrewd, greenish eyes.

"Recreation be blowed!" he retorted hotly. "It's life an' death to *us*. As for pullin' together — no fear; seein' the interests o' both parties pulls two ways."

"Aye, but *do* they, if ye take a straight look at things, 'stead o' squintin' contempshus down yer nose? Where'd labour be if there was no landlords nor masters to screw more wages out of, eh? In my humble notion 'tis jes' the man an' wumman business all over. They must 'ave their slap at each other to ease theirselves; but atween the slaps they *got* to pull together or what 'ud come to creation? But 'oo's agoin' to larn that to Bert an' 'is lot? Not no bloomin' furriners an' upstarts. 'Tis the jennywyne article, like yerself, Mr. Derek, that's gettin' too scarce in 'igh places. I 'ad one of 'em sleepin' 'ere on'y larst week: an' we got talkin' this way: an' 'e says to me, 'Mr. Goslin,' 'e says, 'we'm natural born alleys, we Tories, an' them as work on the land. That was Dizzy's notion,' 'e says; 'an' if any man ever 'ad 'is 'ead screwed on tight it was 'im.'"

Derek nodded.

"But a good deal has happened since then. Most of you fellows have simply become pawns in the game of the middle-class Liberals. They've made bad blood between us and you, for their own ends; and it's *your* vote they're counting on to help them play old Harry with the British Constitution."

At that, the spark in Bert's eyes leaped into flame.

"You mean — they've took us in all along the line?"

Derek smiled. "Manceuvred — would be a politer word!"

"Mr. Derek, sir, that's a lie—no matter if the King spoke it."

"Now then — you keep your mouth shut!" old Gosling shouted, emphasizing the command with a very square fist. "No disrespeck to 'is Majesty under my roof. Mr. Derek ain't

no fancy talker, tellin' you 'lection lies such as you swallered without blinkin' year before last. *I kin remember the treacle they powered over us in nineteen 'six better nor neither o' you.* All we 'ad to do was to fling in the votes, damn Joe Chamberlain, dish the Tories—an' 'ey, presto, a new 'eaven an' earth would come along by express train. That express got off the rails somewhere, I'm thinkin', afore ever it reached England."

Bert began to look a little crestfallen. "But we got the People's Budget," he urged with less assurance. "And the Land Scheme an' Insurance."

"Ninepence for fourpence! *Ef* you believe in it! Eh, Mr. Derek?"

"Precisely!" Derek agreed with a twinkle.

"What's wrong with it then?" the boy flung in angrily.

"It's clumsy tinkering, Bert," Derek said, more gravely, "with German tools. That's been the tune of it, all round, these last few years: sops flung to those who shout the loudest; but no serious attempt to tackle wages, strikes, lock-outs, housing. As for your Insurances and things — hasn't it ever struck you that each time the State gives you ninepence for fourpence with one hand, it steals away a bit of your personal liberty with the other? And when that's gone on long enough you'll all be like so many sheep in a pen, with the State for your shepherd and not a foot of free space to kick your heels in. If you think I'm piling it on, go to Germany and keep your eyes and ears open. Over there the average man is so coddled by the State that he can't call his soul his own; and the Radicals and Socialists you vote for are mapping out their patent paradise on much the same lines."

"Oh, Lord! I never saw it *that* way."

Derek suppressed a smile.

"If many of you were allowed to see it *that* way, it would spoil the show."

"An' we got to walk into their sheep's pen blindfolded? Thanks off'ly — for nothin'!"

He pushed back his chair impatiently and got upon his feet. The meal was over and Gosling was filling his pipe.

"Tell you what, Dad. You say I can believe Mr. Derek. Well, if the old country's goin' the way he says, that puts the top on my argyment for Canada. You said Providence sent him along. Let him speak up. I'm agreeable."

Derek looked from father to son with his sudden smile. "Gosling's right about England needing her own men and money. But till she changes her present tactics she can't blame go-ahead young fellows for preferring to try their luck elsewhere. As to the capital — you can hardly ask me to vote away another man's money!"

"Ear, 'ear!" Gosling applauded with his knife handle. "'E'd vote away another chap's money on 'isself, without blinkin', would Bert! A cool 'undred 'e's askin'; and not me first born, neither. Thar's young Tom — that steps into my shoes — doin' well on 'is own. An' thar's James workin' steady under Farmer Groves. What'll 'e say if I plump a nice bit o' capital on Bert? Not ter mention thar's George comin' on; and my two gals — I ax you, Mr. Derek, plain an' straight, does Bert, there, strike you as a likely sort of 'vestment — eh? 'E's got the brains, all right; an' 'e's got the push. 'E swears, if 'e does well, 'e'll pay me back: an' ef 'e gets 'isself in a knot 'e won't come on me to fy-nance 'is resurrekshun. Ef you wos in my place would yer feel like backin' 'im to the tune of a round 'underd?"

The luckless Bert — completely taken aback — grew red with mingled rage and awkwardness; redder still under the scrutiny of Derek's direct and smiling gaze. Only acute curiosity checked the overflow of his pent-up wrath: and Derek's momentary hesitation seemed to him interminable.

"Tell him you wouldn't be no such dam' fool — an' be done with it," he muttered, clenching and unclenching the hands he had thrust into his pocket.

Derek's smile deepened. "I'm not so sure." Then, turning to Gosling, he said quietly: "The truth is — I feel like backing him myself to the tune of fifty — if you can manage the rest. I can see he's in earnest. Why not give him his chance?"

If Bert had been taken aback before, he now stood confounded. His mouth had gone dry with nervous excitement; the whole thing was so remote from his wildest imaginings that he had not a ghost of a notion what he ought to say.

Old Gosling, it seemed, was in no such dilemma. His voice broke in harshly on the exultant confusion of the boy's thoughts.

"Now then, Bert, be you struck deaf an' dumb? Up an' tell Mr. Derek you'll never fergit 'is generous offer, but you an' me ain't got no right to 'is money —"

Bert's heart dropped like a stone into his boots: but before he could screw himself to the painful point of obedience, Derek was speaking again.

"Nonsense, nonsense!" he said, a touch of brusqueness in his tone, "I'd sooner hear him speak the truth and say outright that he'll be jolly glad of that fifty and he wouldn't refuse it for a kingdom."

Bert's irrepressible grin told him he had hit the mark; and there flashed a look between them that seemed to put the awkward business of giving and taking on a perfectly natural footing. Lord's son and publican's son, they were boys before all, with the human link of youth between them.

"Thought so!" Derek chuckled and rose from the table as if to conclude the matter. "We'll take it as said! And that squares things so far as I'm concerned. You can settle the rest without my help."

"But Mr. Derek — sir —" the old man protested; and Derek heard the ghost of a tremor in his voice.

"All right, Gosling. Nothing to worry about," he said in a changed tone. "Give you my word, my father would approve. And — er — look here, if my room's ready, I think I'll turn in. I'm dog tired."

"Yes, sir. *Quite* ready, sir. Molly shall bring the hot water." Gosling's professional manner came timely to his aid. With remarkable alacrity he pounced upon the door handle; and perhaps for the first time that automatic sign of respect was, for him, a genuine expression of the real thing.

"I s'pose, sir," he ventured, emboldened by Derek's friendly

nod of acknowledgment — “An old man an’ a fawther do be allowed to say thank ‘ee?”

Derek smiled. “Honour bright, Gosling, all the thanks I want is to know you’ll play up to my lead.”

“You kin rely on me, sir. An’ please God the boy’ll not shame yer good opinion though ’e do seem to ’ave lost ’is senses an’ ’is tongue —”

“He’ll recover them! Good-night, Bert.” He nodded over his shoulder at the figure on the hearthrug.

“Good-night, Mr. Derek.”

And if Bert had lost his tongue, there was an unmistakable note in his voice that gratified Derek more than any stumbling attempt at thanks, however sincere.

CHAPTER IV

Aristocrats are the same everywhere, whether they have titles, or whether they have none. They are those who believe they owe their best to God and men — and they serve.

PRICE COLLIER

THE best bedroom of the Avonleigh Arms was filled to overflowing with a curtained four-poster, and an imposing suite of early Victorian mahogany. In the negligible space between, it was possible to move circumspectly as became the discreet period to which the room and its trappings belonged.

Mrs. Gosling, Derek supposed, had slept in that bed on her wedding night and every night after — except for an occasional seaside trip — till the day of her death, five years ago. Above the washing-stand hung an enlarged photograph of her with smooth-plastered hair and a medallion brooch as big as a duck's egg. It was a pleasant, shrewd face, with a strong look of Bert about the eyes and brow. Perhaps she also, in feminine fashion, had yearned beyond the skyline. Perhaps she would have understood better than his father her son's remark, "too much ever-and-ever-amen sort o' business, for my taste."

It was those words, more than anything else, that had awakened Derek's sympathy for the sulky boy who had so evidently resented his intrusion and old Gosling's burst of confidence. In point of fact, they were more than half responsible for the third act of sheer impulse that stood to his credit — or discredit — in one short day. Yet, had any one called him a creature of impulse, he would have stoutly — and rightly — denied the impeachment. It would be nearer the truth to say that certain root qualities in him were so vigorous, so assured, that when the appeal was to one of these, action was swift and prompt, unhampered by the wavering that besets a more complex frame of mind. Perhaps this is why a genuine act of im-

pulse is so rarely regretted. We mistrust, at our peril, the deeper promptings of the heart, which, in vital matters, steers a truer course than the head through the cross-currents of life.

Derek went straight to the square bay window, and flung every casement wide. After weeks of living in the open, curtains and windows still seemed inventions of the devil.

Outside there were stars and pale wisps of cloud. A gibbous moon hung low and red over Burnt Hill faintly illuminating the queer medley of houses, old and new. The street was lighted in patches by occasional lamp-posts set very wide apart. A ghost of a breeze stirred the sycamore under the window; and that faint sound intensified the larger stillness beyond.

Derek yawned, settled himself in the one armchair, and leisurely filled his pipe. The statement that he was dog tired had been a pardonable exaggeration, an excuse to escape from the consequences of his own act. He was just sufficiently tired to feel that smoking a pipe in an armchair and turning over the contents of his brain was occupation enough for any man of average intelligence. And the day's events provided much material for reflection. Breakfast and Paris seemed endless ages away. . . .

More than ever now, he was glad of the impulse that had sent him on to Ashbourne. Queer how often such trifles seemed to form hinges on which the big things turned. To-night, in Gosling's stuffy little parlour, he had stumbled on the fulfilment of an ambition dating from the time when first his acute sense of justice and sympathy with the under dog had given him a tilt towards Socialism; a tilt hardly to be escaped these days, by any thoughtful young man. How far it propels him is largely a matter of temperament, circumstance and — dare one add? — an innate capacity for facing facts. Derek, as has been seen, already began to detect the fundamental flaws in that Utopian panacea for every ill that man's flesh and spirit and bank-book are heir to. He was critical of men and things, simply because of his urgent need to know their real nature; and because the doubting, searching spirit of the true sceptic lay at the root of

his hunger for knowledge and truth. Very early he had realized that the School and University he loved were mere tributaries to the turbulent main stream of life. Very early his brain and heart had reached out to those vast regions beyond the fringes of mere pleasantness in which he lived.

If only he could enter into those regions! If he could, even in a measure feel, from within, the struggles of those who live bravely and bitterly, whose hand is against the comfortable, the leisured, the rich! Then, perhaps, he might arrive at discovering whether there was any virtue in the nostrums of idealists for the sins and sorrows of the great submerged. For himself he distrusted, innately, the champions of wholesale subversion. He refused to believe that the world could possibly be a better place to live in for any one, if Labour Members wrangled in the House of Lords, and Buckingham Palace were converted into a home for state-reared babies or decayed gentle-women. But he had his share of the divine discontent and healthy rebelliousness that is the Englishman's prerogative and a sure guarantee that England is an abiding city.

One thing, at least, was certain, the move in the right direction ought to come from the men at the top. If aristocracy meant anything it meant a genuine spirit of service and of leadership toward those less favoured by heritage and tradition; a deeper, more personal sense of responsibility among those who have, toward those who have not. As for favoured casuals, like himself, it was simply and obviously 'up' to them to give those others a hand out of the mud and the ruts whenever opportunity offered.

This last conviction was no mere heady impulse of youth haloed with vague sentimentalism. It was a deep and dumb necessity of his nature that might yet land him in troubled waters: a quality that must have made his mother at once proud and anxious had she eyes for any one on earth but her elder son. To-night his first real chance had been given him; and in his unhesitating response to it you have the measure of his conviction.

But Bert's case was a comparatively simple affair: just a

matter of cash. Among those others — the rank and file of the Many — cash was not the only, nor even the surest, solvent of the difficulties that crushed their spirits and embittered their lives. The puzzle of puzzles for Derek — as for all who have honestly travelled the same road — was how to get at them; how learn to think their thoughts, see life from their angle of vision.

Superficially, of course, the thing was done every day by scores of zealous Churchmen and amateurs in philanthropy. Derek knew something of that from disconcerting personal experience. He had spent part of more than one vacation at certain East End Mission Houses; strong in the conviction that young Oxford, very much in earnest, must have a genuine message, genuine gifts, for those outside the gates. But soon he had discovered, to his frank astonishment, that young Oxford — and young Cambridge no less — had more to learn and to receive from that underworld of struggle and limitation than had seemed possible upon a superficial survey of both.

This, in itself, was a stimulating discovery. The trouble began when he perceived that the bulk of his fellow-workers — earnest and sincere men, honestly intent on "lifting the masses" — had never made it at all. It was as if one vital channel of communication were blocked; and it possibly accounted for a good deal of disheartening failure. But there had been more than one jar because he had ventured to speak his mind.

Rebuffed and puzzled, he had turned from his fellows, to the men and boys who came readily enough to their meetings and clubs. With them he had fared better — up to a point. Beyond it, he could make little real headway: and, rightly or wrongly, he came to feel as if the whole fabric was built upon a pleasant sham. In place of truths he was offered shibboleths; and half the young ordinands he met seemed amazingly out of touch with realities: well-meaning, spiritual-minded men, content to live and work in water-tight compartments, impervious to the more rousing and staggering facts of life. That there were notable exceptions goes without saying: but in the end, Derek had retired, baffled by the intangible barrier of caste, by

the complacence of enthusiasts, who dispensed their own particular brand of other-worldly wisdom, like a patent medicine, too often with scant knowledge of the patient's actual, urgent needs.

Derek's valiant efforts to emulate them had merely made him feel a Pharisee for his pains. Everything was so easy for him; so hard for the men and boys of whose handicaps and struggles he knew next to nothing, except that most of them had probably never been given a fair chance.

Baffled in his first round, he refused to accept defeat. He would get at them yet — those others — in defiance of obstacles and grooves. He was beginning to think it could best be done by trying to share their experience and so catch a glimpse of their point of view. But — a large 'but' — how far was it possible for a man, well-born like himself, to become merged for a time in the "unseen leaven of good-will and fellowship working in the common bread"? Practical difficulties would be many and obvious; but the idea had not yet reached the practical stage. It had lain hidden in him, for months, like a seed germinating in the dark: and to-night — stimulated by Bert's ambition and Miss de Vigne's departure for Canada — it sent a green shoot above ground in the shape of a feasible plan.

Admittedly, Lord Avonleigh's son could not become a working man in any part of the British Isles. But away there, on the other side of the world, it would be a comparatively simple matter. Why not have the courage of his conviction and make the plunge?

A few years of roughing it would do him no earthly harm. He was blessed with a fine constitution. Much 'footer' and running had made him 'hard as nails.' And he suddenly realized that Avonleigh without his father would be unendurable. If he intended to leave England, now was the acceptable time. And again — why not?

His imagination caught fire. Details crowded into his brain. He would go out steerage, of course. The thing must be done thoroughly. And he would take merely a handful of capital such as most emigrants scrape together for a nest egg against

very rainy days. Beyond that, he would not touch his allowance. He would learn what it meant for a man to make his own way against odds, in a world where he was nothing more than so much raw human energy and capacity to be hired by the week or the month. If half the tales one heard were true, the fact that he was of gentle birth would excite no particular suspicion or surprise. Canada and Australia were full of Army and University men who had gone under, either through ill fortune or ill doing: and he must resign himself to being reckoned, a fragment of that lost legion.

A passing temptation to go out with Bert — unknown, of course, to any one but Bert — was promptly thrust aside. That would be to shirk the genuine adventure; to make an artificial thing of it, like fancy slumming. Also — there was the honour of Avonleigh; dear to him as to any of them, in spite of Van's velvety scratch about a *nom de plume*. On this occasion, Van need feel no qualms. The *nom de plume* was an essential part of his equipment —

And with a start he discovered that this trifling affair of changing his name was the most distasteful part of the whole business. He had as little self-love in him as any young man of his years: but he found — with a touch of amused dismay — that he loved his own name. Its link with the inner Derek was vital; and he felt sure he would never answer to any other. The impulse that, in its broad aspect, had seemed simple enough, grew more complex the longer he looked at it . . .

Suddenly, through the fog of his dilemma, there flashed a happy idea. He had merely to knock the "o" out of Blount — and his name was shorn of its link with his father's house. "Derek" he could not bring himself to shed at any price. From the moment that he took the plunge the Honourable Derek Ivo Moray Blount would become plain Derek Blunt. He felt he had been let down easily; but there remained the final question — how much of all this did he intend to tell his father?

He was a clumsy hand at mangling the truth. Suppose he made a valiant effort and confessed his keen wish to arrive at a

more intimate knowledge of the working man's character and views? Would he ever succeed in making them understand?

His mother's fastidious sense of propriety would be outraged. His father would probably shrivel up his immature arguments with a few sarcastic remarks. Van and Ina would treat him to a mild flow of chaff. At best, they would look on him as a harmless lunatic. At worst, they would suppose him infected with the rank spirit of industrial socialism, in which case he would certainly lose his temper and with it his slender chance of a fair hearing.

No: he supposed he was a coward; but he did not feel like facing that ordeal. His adventure might seem no more to others than a mere boy's prank; an excuse to elude the shackles as long as he could. It meant a great deal more to him. Right or wrong, the conviction grew — while he sat there smoking and dreaming late into the night — that if a fair percentage of young men in his position could be induced to spend two or three years of early manhood knocking round the world in earnest — instead of knocking about town and sampling continental cities — there might yet be some chance of restoring the natural alliance between peasant and landowner: an alliance undermined, in the eighteenth century, by callous misuse of power; still further strained when the wedge of mutual distrust was driven in at a vulnerable point, by the Radical demagogue angling for votes; and snapped outright in these later days by the absentee landlord, the curse of the country.

For all his youth and his engaging touch of Oxford omniscience, Derek was no mere tyro on this vital question that England ignores or mishandles at her peril. He had been reared, not among those who prattle of 'The Land' at dinner-tables or flourish it on party platforms, but among those who live on it and for it, whether high or low. At Oxford, he had chosen the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries in England for his special period of history; and had probed deeper into his subject to gain his modest Third than Van had done to secure the Second that had so narrowly missed being a First. Unquestionably, also, he owed a good deal to his friendship with

that keen and capable young landowner, Mark Forsyth. If he could not yet see more than a few facets of a large and many-sided subject, he had the root of the matter in him. He loved the land — pasture and arable, moor and forest and billowing downs, and its sturdy inexpressive people: loved it all for its own sake, simply because it was England: for which very good reason he felt impelled, in his practical fashion, to try and enlarge his understanding and widen his point of view.

Could he have poured out to his father, naturally and simply, one-half of what he thought and felt about it all, matters might have taken another and a happier turn for them both. But though the very young and the very old have some mysterious link of their own, the gulf between youth and middle age is curiously deep and wide, only to be spanned by certain rare qualities of mind and heart. Between Derek and his father was no bridge of understanding secure enough to tempt the boy across. Nor did he feel competent, as yet, to express the large, vague thoughts that were moulding his character and his whole future life. A clumsy half attempt at explaining himself would be worse than useless. His pride refused to chance the risk. He would simply state his wish to travel widely for a few years, and get a little first-hand knowledge of the Empire.

He did not look forward to that uncomfortable half-hour: but he must make out the best case he could for himself and hope to escape with a reprimand. Jack must be told, of course. The good fellow would laugh at him and quite fail to see the point. But in Jack's chaff lurked no flavour of contempt, such as Derek was perhaps too ready to suspect in the case of Van. The one person with whom he felt really eager to discuss his notion was Mark, whose enthusiasm would not fail to meet him more than halfway; and Derek was one of those difficult people who need to be met halfway if anything like intimacy is ever to be achieved.

A nuisance that the Forsyths were in Scotland. But October would see them back at Wynchcombe Friars — and then things would really get a move on. . . .

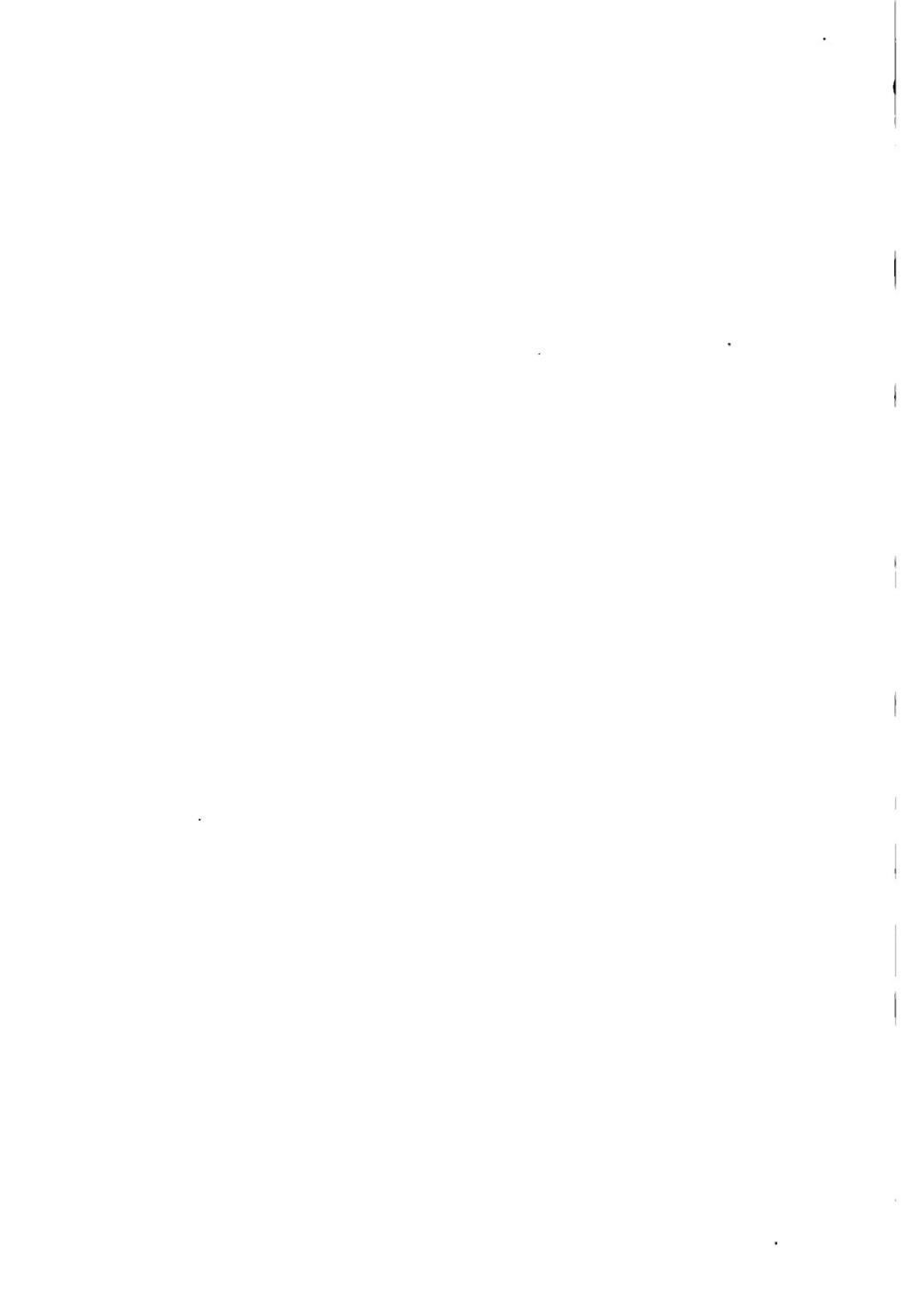
At this point he became aware that his pipe had gone out and that his brain was bemused with sleep too long deferred. He flung up his arms; yawned extensively and glanced with a shade less disfavour at the forbidding double bed. Now that matters were settled, he felt better satisfied with things in general than he had done for some time.

Rather odd, he reflected sleepily, as he turned up the blue gas jet to a yellow flare, that a chance meeting with Jack's sister and the mishap of his inappropriate arrival should, between them, have served to crystallize a decision so momentous to himself, so entirely disconnected with them. The Hinges, again! And as his head sank deep into his pillow, he wondered — still more sleepily — what fresh discoveries and failures lay in wait for him behind the door that hung upon those hinges — just temptingly ajar?

It was characteristic of Derek that he practically counted on failure. The very word success had about it a suggestion of finality that weakened its appeal to one who was an adventurer at heart.

END OF BOOK I

BOOK II
UNTIL THE HARVEST



BOOK II UNTIL THE HARVEST

CHAPTER I

With the same measure that ye mete, it shall be measured to you again.

St. LUKE

DEREK's peculiar fashion of considering his mother was, in the circumstances, very much to the point. For once in a way he had done precisely what she would have had him do; and whether the knowledge would have given him more pain or satisfaction it were hard to say. His jealousy of Van would certainly have been sharpened could he have trespassed on the privacy of her thoughts that afternoon as she drove home from her fortnightly visit to the Cottage Hospital.

Of all her duties, as great lady of the neighbourhood, she found this one the greatest bore. But it was a social point of honour to keep one's engagements; also, she believed that the 'poor dears' would miss her if she failed to turn up. But to-day she had felt almost grateful to them for diverting her mind a little from this, the first serious worry that had troubled the still waters of her life since Van had frightened all Avonleigh by indulging in pneumonia on the top of influenza seven years ago. And before Van was himself again, she too had succumbed to the evil thing, that had left her a little deaf and accentuated a tendency to nervous heart trouble — just sufficiently pronounced to be very useful on occasion, without giving her family undue cause for anxiety. It had saved her from succumbing to that smelly and terrifying modern infliction — the motor-car. And now — as she rolled homeward in her victoria, with a squirrel rug tucked round her knees — there crept into her mind a hope that it might save her from the still more terrifying prospect of five years' banishment from England and Avonleigh — and Van.

Of course the appointment was flattering to Evan; but — her plans for the winter were practically settled; and she resented, almost as an impertinence, this volcanic intrusion of the unexpected into her daily round of pleasant, foreseen things. Really it was most inconsiderate of Lord Fareham! For she didn't at all like the thought of Evan going without her; but the thought of going with him she liked infinitely less.

He had not said a word about it before he started. That was so like him: leaving her to worry out alone, with never a hint of his own wishes to help her. As a matter of fact, she felt uncomfortably certain that he would expect her to go; and she had been telling herself at intervals that she supposed she would go — when it came to the point. Even now she was still 'supposing'; still holding off the inexorable moment when she could no longer sit gracefully on the fence — an attitude singularly convenient for herself and singularly irritating to the rest of her family. . . .

The prospect of twenty-four hours' respite, and an evening alone with Van, was balm in Gilead. Rather a mercy that Derek had delayed his return: but it was very tiresome of him, not to let them know where he was or exactly when they might expect him. These little uncertainties always worried her. He knew that perfectly well. But he never troubled his head about any one's convenience except his own. He had all the faults of this graceless, restless new century that was rapidly making the world an impossible place for decent, quiet people. London — social London — was already 'impossible': and even at Avonleigh, one was not altogether immune. Derek and Ina — in their utterly different fashions — brought eddies from the modern whirlpool into her land-locked harbour. Derek, with his eternal how and why; his uncomfortable trick of seeing through plausible evasions; Ina, with her hard, eager pursuit of all that was newest in clothes and crazes and slang.

Mercifully dear Van was enough of a Barnard to have escaped the contagion. He was so well-mannered, so restful and considerate that she forgave him for telling her so little really about himself. They would talk things over to-night; and in a de-

cently veiled corner of her heart lurked the hope that he would fortify her own slowly gathering resolve.

On reaching home she found him in the hammock still asleep. His mouth had dropped open a little — not unbecomingly; his half-smoked cigarette had fallen and singed a favourite Persian rug. Had Derek been the offender, her instant sensation would have been pure annoyance. As it was, she merely thought: "Poor darling! He *must* have been tired." And for a few moments she stood watching him with a little, tugging ache at her heart.

It was the boy she still saw, rather than the man who — for all his affectionate ways — had been slipping insidiously out of reach for the last ten years. Asleep, his face lost the imprint of the world and regained its innocent serenity, from which purely natural phenomenon she gleaned comfort, in view of certain fitful speculations about whole tracts of his life that lay outside her ken. She liked the smooth sweep of his eyebrows; the fastidious curve of his nostril, rather more marked than her own; the long lines of his figure and small aristocratic head. In effect it was the masculine projection of herself that she worshipped in the person of her sleeping son. The idea of leaving him for five years roused in her the strongest emotion of which she was capable. And Evan — who did not trouble to understand her — was probably taking it all for granted up there in Town —

The prosaic dread of damp disturbed her musings, and reluctantly she went back into the house.

The drawing-room was fragrant with the faint, sweet scent of late roses, and a footman was putting fresh logs on the fire. It was a lofty room, hung with French and English water-colours. Long windows heavily curtained looked out upon the lawn. A portrait of herself, in grey velvet and old lace, stood conspicuously near the grand piano. It was still fresh enough to give her a small shock of pleasure whenever she looked at it. But this evening her gaze dwelt on a pastel study of Van, aged ten, that hung above her inlaid bureau. She wondered how

long he had been asleep out there. A dim idea that he was not strong dated from pneumonia days. Slipping into the hall, she carried off her rug and laid it cautiously over Van. After that she felt happier.

Presently, with her maid's assistance, she exchanged her dress for a silk wrapper and settled herself, as usual, in an invalid chair by the fire. As usual, she picked up a novel lying face downwards on her table; and, as usual, Powell discreetly withdrew, switching off the dressing-table light, leaving only the shaded glow of the lamp at her mistress's elbow.

Lady Avonleigh was not an imaginative woman. But the morning's shock had galvanized into activity such imagination as she possessed; and to-night she was very much aware of the stately beauty and sheltered peace of this home that was her bulwark against the rising tide of twentieth-century unrest. If she agreed to go out with Evan, she must exchange all this for the dangers and instabilities of a long voyage; for 'black servants,' whom she would never trust, and snakes and insects and damp . . .

She would never get a wink of sleep, with the uncertainty hanging over her; so Van was to be her touchstone; and it was not altogether without guile that she chose her gown of velvet and old lace, completing the effect with one realistic satin passion flower. Van noticed such things; and, in her heart, she wanted to please his fastidious eye; to make him feel he would miss her if she were gone.

He did notice that she had on his favourite gown; and he thought: "Poor dear! She's badly jarred. She's wearing that top-hole gown for a kind of moral support."

He had enough of the woman in him to understand very well the mysterious link between good clothes and good courage; but her real reason escaped him altogether.

Dinner was very much as Derek had imagined it. The setting perfect in detail, the talk negligible.

Nothing of importance could be said while the small butler and the tall footman hovered in the penumbra, like benevolent

birds of prey. Jennings, the butler, suffered from an unorthodox twinkle in his blue eye, which he tried to conceal under a mask of fierceness. And his fierceness to-night was phenomenal. He knew perfectly well there was 'something in the wind'; that her ladyship was longing to 'have it out with Mr. Van.' But he dared not appear to hurry the sacred rite even out of consideration for her. So for half an hour she made trite remarks about the weather or mutual acquaintances; and Van made trite remarks about the food and criticized the shooting of his friends in the North. Then the door closed for the last time and he applied the spirit-lighter to his cigarette.

"Shall I stay, dear?" she asked. Even cigarettes in the drawing-room were taboo.

Van smiled and nodded; and they moved into armchairs by the fire.

"You're feeling pretty worried, I expect," he remarked sympathetically. "Are you hoping, *sub rosa*, that it will come to nothing?"

He was the only one of her children who would have ventured such a remark: and she shook her head at him with a tolerant smile of reproach.

"Father's interests must be one's first consideration."

"That's to say, you aren't violently keen yourself?"

She sighed and sipped her coffee. "Well, hardly, dear, at my age, and in my uncertain state of health. I'm a bad traveller. Entertaining isn't one of my strong points; and as far as I can gather a woman of position in India does very little else. The question is — with all these drawbacks, *would* I be any use to your father out there, or would I simply add to his worries and anxieties?"

Light began to dawn on Van.

"What does Father think about it?"

"I don't know. Does one ever really get at what he thinks — about personal things?"

"It's a bit of a problem certainly. But you can't expect him to say outright that you wouldn't be much use. Perhaps he's taking it for granted you'll go."

"I'm afraid it's more like that he hasn't yet thought about — me at all."

Van glanced at her under his eyelids. She was a woman who strictly preserved the decent reticences of home life, and she had never spoken so of his father, even to him. Their feeling for each other, if it existed, was so carefully hidden that it was difficult to imagine they had ever been lovers. Privately, Van believed they never had.

"She is badly jarred," he thought again, and the conviction stirred his facile sympathy. But her rather pathetic remark was not easy to answer, so he maintained a tactful silence and applied himself diligently to his cigarette.

She leaned forward and held out one hand to the blaze. The light made pink transparencies of her long thin fingers, and the fact that they were not quite steady made them look still more fragile. Van thought: "She really isn't strong enough, and she wants me to tell her so."

Her next remark confirmed him.

"How do *you* feel about it yourself, dear? I've been a little better this summer; but then — that heart attack last month — and the Bombay climate is *so* trying. Is it better to take the risk than to fail him? Or would it really be unfair on him — and you? It *is* hard to know what's best for every one all round. Do tell me candidly what you think."

Van was silent a moment, caressing his moustache and noting the queer upward shadows of the firelight on her face. His candid opinion was the last gift he was likely to bestow on any one — least of all on her.

"I think," he said at last, "that it's very hard on you being suddenly faced with such a big decision when you're so far from strong. Still, it would be rough on Father going without you. As a Governor, he must have some sort of hostess."

"Yes. That's the difficulty," she began; and suddenly he had an idea.

"Of course there's Aunt Marion. She knows India and she's A *i* at that sort of thing —"

Her gasp of relief was irrepressible. Marion Blount was her husband's favourite sister: unmarried: the very person —!

"My dear Van, how clever of you! It would take *such* a load off my mind. Aunt Marion is so capable, and they are the best of friends —"

"Perhaps Father had her in his mind," Van waxed bolder, seeing he had made a happy shot. "He probably thought things would be easier for you if he found out first about her. After all, suppose anything went seriously wrong with you, the extra worry and anxiety *would* come hard on him. But it's for you — not for Father — to say that sort of thing — isn't it?"

"Yes, yes, of course," she agreed with alacrity. "How stupid of me! It was very thoughtful of your father. . . . And you really feel my going would be inadvisable — on *his* account, as well as my own?"

"Looks like it, doesn't it, all things considered?"

He thought he might be speaking the truth; and he knew very well it was what she wanted him to say. So — being Van — he said it. That was his peculiar fashion of giving a candid opinion; and it was one of the secrets of his popularity — which he also knew very well. To-night it gave him particular satisfaction; for he was fond of his mother and, on the whole, he would rather she stayed at home.

She had risen, now, and laid a light hand on his hair. "What a comfort you are, Van," she said softly. "I knew things would come straight if I could talk them out with you."

And Van thought: "Lucky old Dirks went off in a huff. He would have been most infernally in the way."

Later on, he played to her a little. He had a sympathetic touch and picked up light music easily by ear. And she pretended to read the Court Circular column, because it wouldn't do to let him guess the immensity of her relief.

Yet she had once honestly cared for her husband; and in her colourless fashion she still cared for him enough to wish — quite perversely — that he should need her a little more than he appeared to do. No doubt Van was right. He probably had

Marion in his mind; and she had made herself miserable for nothing. So, instinctively, she drew fresh worries even from the well-spring of her relief.

As a matter of fact she would have found life distinctly dull without her tame menagerie of minor frets and grievances. But she drew the line at major ones; and it was distinctly a major one that they none of them really seemed to want her — not even Van. He had not said he would mind her going or that he was glad of her decision. No one seemed to suppose she needed that sort of thing; yet in secret she hungered for it, and never dreamed that she was simply reaping as she had sown.

It was the same with her husband. She had let him gradually drift away from her without raising a finger to avert the calamity: and there were moments — as to-night — when she felt, with a sudden pang, how lonely she was behind the rampart of her dignity and decent reticences and the *Morning Post*. It did not strike her that Evan might sometimes feel lonely too. He had his intellectual interests, his own menagerie of worries, which he no longer shared with her. True, it was her misfortune that she could not mentally keep pace with him or her sons. But she had to pay the price of disability, which is often quite as heavy as the price of sin.

She had lost Derek on the day that he asked for bread and received a stone. Ina, she could scarcely be said to have found at all. Even in nursery days her only daughter had been a hard little separate entity; a creature who put forth no tendrils: in effect, a shallow miniature edition of her father. So, where Lady Avonleigh might have succeeded, small chance had been given her. And even with her adored Van she had never established anything like real confidence or intimacy.

In her very hidden heart she was mortally envious of Lady Forsyth, to whom she gave no credit for the fact she was obviously a friend, as well as a mother, to her sons. Instead, she wondered, disconsolately, what was wrong with her own boys that they should be so different.

It was not in her to perceive the difference between mother

love and mere maternal instinct that wears thinner with each year. For she did not know — and now would never learn — that all progressive love, like progressive life, is by death; that the divine dictum, "man must die to live," is no arbitrary decree, but a fundamental law of life and growth.

Only now and again she felt oppressed by a vague consciousness of failure all round in her home relations; and the woman who fails in these is in as deplorable a case as a man who fails in his profession.

After Van had finished playing they talked fitfully of trivial things. But his good-night kiss when she rose — on the stroke of ten — was less perfunctory than usual.

"Buck up, dear, and don't worry," he said kindly. "Father would be the last person to let you run any risks. If Aunt Marion goes with him, you'll both be satisfied."

"And — *you*?" she ventured, a hand on his arm.

His smile was half tender, half amused. "Well, naturally — the answer is in the affirmative!"

And with that she had to rest content.

"But, Evan — the climate —" she began.

"*And* the mosquitoes and the white ants!" he took her up with his baffling half-smile. "It's possible we may survive them all in Government House. The complete change will do you no end of good. Enlarge your mind all round. Bombay's a vastly interesting place, Esther. Indian women there worth knowing, as well as our own people. Marion envies you. She'll help you all she can. I told her to come along down to-morrow and get you going. Rather a good idea if she went out with us for the cold weather. She could put you in the way of things —"

He broke off with a start, for his wife's teaspoon clattered against her cup, and her hand shook so that the cup overturned, sending a cascade of hot tea into her lap. Any kind of awkwardness was so unlike her that Lord Avonleigh was taken aback.

"My dear Esther!" he exclaimed: and before her shaking fingers could find a handkerchief he had produced his own and was kneeling on the hearth-rug dabbing her skirt.

"Very clumsy of me," she murmured.

"But you're never clumsy," he said. "And you're shaking like a leaf."

His searching look drew the unwilling blood into her cheeks; and before she could speak the words, so carefully planned in advance, she knew there was no need for them.

"I — see," he said slowly in a changed, hard voice. "You don't intend to go. I was making things awkward for you — I apologize."

He had risen from his knees — carefully because of rheumatism; and he stood there, looking down at her with what Derek called his 'shut-up face.'

Sheer relief that the truth was out helped her to regain her lost control.

"No, Evan," she protested. "You don't really see. It's not a case of 'intending.'"

"It never is — when we follow our own desires."

He saw her wince without compunction. He could be un-

merciful when hurt or angered; and at the moment he was both.

She drew herself up, stung by his tone.

"You are unfair — and unkind. I suppose you won't believe — now — that I've been worrying myself to death to know which way would be best — for you." (In the misery and confusion of the moment she imagined she was speaking the truth.) "It's not as if I were a young woman in robust health. You know perfectly well —"

"I know perfectly well," he said, with his deadly quietness, "that your many ailments — real and fanciful — have never yet hindered you from doing what you are keen about."

"You imply that I am that detestable thing — a *malade imaginaire*?"

"I don't deal in implications. The truth is that when a disagreeable duty comes your way, you work yourself up till you really *are* ill — or very near it. Look — you're shaking still. Have another cup of tea and don't bother any more about Bombay. I can take Marion. She'll jump at the offer. But I naturally thought you might like to come — if only for part of the time."

His reasonableness pricked her to sudden penitence.

"Of course I would, Evan, in some ways; but —"

He silenced her with a gesture, and pointed at her disfigured skirt.

"*That* is your real answer. A woman never knows when she has said enough. Now get on with your tea."

Her hand had so pathetic a tremor that he quietly took the teapot from her and filled the cup himself, adding milk and sugar exactly to her taste. Van could not have done it better. It was these apparent contradictions in her husband that so often puzzled her and sometimes shamed her — as now. He would stab her with his tongue under provocation, and a few minutes later salve the wound he had made with some quietly courteous action.

"There — the worst's over. I'm not going to drag you out by the hair of your head." He gravely handed her a plate of

sandwiches, then sat down as before, and emptied his tumbler.
“Will you allow me one cigarette?”

“Of course.”

“Thanks. I’m tired.”

He leaned back and stretched out his legs, regarding her with his odd half-smile — whimsical, inscrutable. “I’ve a good few problems to worry over, too. Things started here and there; and I shan’t be able to see them through. Also there are my household appointments to make — out there. Naturally I should like Van for my Private Secretary. He’s had good training, and he’d be useful in the social line. I thought you two would work well together.”

She put down her teacup rather suddenly.

“Are you going . . . to take him?” she asked in a toneless voice, carefully controlled.

“I should like to, of course. It would be a comfort to have *one* member of my family with me.”

He knew quite well that she was on thorns; perhaps regretting her own withdrawal. But all things considered, he felt she deserved it. He even took a wicked pleasure in balancing the pros and cons.

“That would mean — shutting up Avonleigh?” Her question was addressed to the middle button of his waistcoat.

“Yes. Or letting it. That’s one of the drawbacks.”

“Rather a big one, isn’t it?”

“M—yes. But would Van care to live here in any case?”

“Would he care to spend five years out of England?” she countered, desperate, but controlled.

“You mean — *you* wouldn’t care about it,” he corrected her with perfect suavity.

“I said ‘Van,’ Evan.”

He discerned a faint challenge in her tone, and his thin lips twitched under his moustache.

“It’s six of Van and half a dozen of you as far as India goes. The Empire means precious little to either of you. It’s my *one* real quarrel with Van. Five years of Bombay would be a liberal education for you both. But you needn’t be afraid.

(You were — mortally — three minutes ago.) He'd vote for London and Avonleigh if I put it to him. But I'm not going to put it to him."

He saw relief flow through her like a warm cordial. The fingers that grasped an arm of her chair slackened, and she helped herself to another sandwich. Watching her under his lids, he thought: "Poor Esther! She was hard hit. But she can stand up to it — *when* she chooses."

Aloud he said: "However, if he stays at home, he must put his back into looking after Avonleigh. I shall give him special powers. Make him fully responsible for things. He's hardly had enough of that so far. Malcolm's invaluable; but still — much as I should enjoy having the boy with me, I think it's advisable that one of us should remain on the spot."

"Yes, I do think that's a very important consideration," she agreed, with guarded alacrity; and he smiled at the toes of his outstretched boots.

"Also — a very convenient one. But I'm glad we're agreed on one point at least!"

Soon after that he left her; and as the door closed behind him she leaned back in her chair, exhausted with the strain of it all, yet immeasurably relieved.

Twenty minutes later he was in the saddle — the finest arm-chair in the world; his London attire exchanged for rough tweeds, leggings and a faded felt hat: a very old friend to which he clung obstinately in spite of fitful remonstrances from his wife.

He had decided, on impulse, to ride over to Ashbourne and see what progress they were making with his new model almshouses. Would he ever see them completed?

The crisp, clean September air, the rhythmic movement and the restful companionship of the sensitive creature he rode, magically removed all trace of weariness from his body and brain. The jar of his wife's defection had made him unpleasantly aware that the last two days had been more of a strain than they had any business to be for a man in the prime of life — and health. He would have given much to feel quite at

ease about that last. It was his confirmed opinion — shared by many strong men — that doctors were mostly fools. But they could be very disquieting fools — on occasion; as he had discovered yesterday afternoon. It would never do, though, for a man to let himself be hamstrung by the cryptic stuff they were paid to talk. The poor devils had to earn their livelihood; and Lord Avonleigh's private conviction was that he had been robbed of three guineas, in all good faith, by an honest but deluded physician. Wiry and virile, he had reached the meridian of life with nothing worse than an accident or two, and a solitary illness to mar his clean bill of health. Only during the last few years rheumatism had laid stealthy hands upon him; and sensations of pain and heaviness, where none should be, warned him intermittently that vital parts of the little-regarded inner machinery were out of gear.

At first this had made him nervous and uncomfortable, as healthy men are apt to become at the first whisper of disease. But he had despised himself and had lived the thing down. One invalid in the family was trouble enough; and Esther had established a monopoly in that line. Once or twice he had spoken to her casually on the subject, and threatened to trespass on her preserves. Farrar, the family doctor, had spoken also; for the which liberty Lord Avonleigh had never forgiven him.

Remembering these things, he found himself wondering . . . had it even occurred to Esther that, of the two, he had the more reason to shrink from five years of Bombay, plus hard work and heavy responsibility. In the light of her refusal to accompany him, he saw her wifely concern of yesterday morning, and her talk about avoiding risks, as no more than a tactful indication that she, at least, would be wise enough to avoid anything of the kind. Possibly he wronged her. And very certainly he was a fool to have expected anything else. But he had returned home tired, acutely aware of the coming wrench; and being only human, he had hoped, in the teeth of experience, for the support of her wifely approval. He had hoped to enlist her interest by talking things out more fully than was his wont. But the very manner of her greeting had jarred; and before he

could make any real headway the truth was out: all his hardness and bitterness up in arms.

After twenty-eight years of life with her, he might have known — !

Always, at difficult corners, when the real man in him had reached out to the real woman in her, she had most signally failed him: and she never seemed to be aware of the fact. Therein lay the tragedy — for herself and for him.

It cannot be said that Lord Avonleigh's dependence upon any human being was easily discernible. There ran through his whole nature an aloof, impersonal streak, which he had passed on, in a measure, to his second son: yet under the surface, in both, the natural need was there. Other women had discerned it — which did not exactly meet the case. But Esther Avonleigh — a mild, unaggressive egoist — had small gift for reading between the lines. For all that, he did not doubt her affection — or his own. Though love, as an active emotion, could scarcely, now, be said to exist between them, it had once been there. At seven-and-twenty how arrogantly certain he had been of his own heart and his own wisdom! How hotly he had resented his mother's opposition which had unconsciously precipitated the very crisis she sought to prevent. Now, in his hardly earned wisdom, he wondered whether a good few mistaken marriages were not so made.

But he was not addicted to futile burrowings into the past. The present demanded his utmost attention, his utmost energy; and the necessity for speeding-up all round braced him to spurn unauthorized aches and pains.

His dinner with Wyntoun had fairly extinguished that deluded specialist. The two men were at once old friends and old political adversaries; and of late years they had drifted apart. While Lord Wyntoun had been drawn deeper into the political ferment, Lord Avonleigh had retired from an atmosphere of barren controversy and intrigue, thoroughly uncongenial to him as a patriot and a man. He could not bring himself either to idealize 'politics of the pavement,' or, for the sake of preferment, to profess a faith that was not in him.

"I don't disbelieve in the people — far from it," he had written to Wyntoun, in justification of his attitude. "I merely maintain that the whole people, and nothing but the people, spells national collapse. Crowd mentality and crowd morality — what are they but mind and morals reduced to their lowest common measure? And democracy rampant is crowd morality in excelsis; the apotheosis of officialdom and inefficiency. I regard it as a fever from which the real England may yet recover — in due time."

Naturally Wyntoun disagreed with him, and liked him none the less for that.

Meantime, while the fever raged, Lord Avonleigh quietly stood aside and devoted himself, in his practical unsentimental fashion, to the interests of his own share of England's population on both estates. He seldom used his seat in the upper House these days, and still more seldom spoke, except on Imperial affairs or to plead the unpopular cause of 'the Land' — the whole land, forest, field and pasture — a subject he had made peculiarly his own. The same impersonal streak that isolated him in his home had kept him independent of party shackles and party claims; with the natural result that he was respected in both camps; popular in neither. He believed in the British Empire; he was admittedly sound on social reform; and his worst enemies could not impugn his integrity, his sanity, or his breadth of view.

Hence Lord Wyntoun's bolt from the blue. He could have paid his friend no higher compliment, of which that same friend was very well aware.

Nevertheless he could not pretend to relish the prospect of five years' banishment from Avonleigh and his wife and Van. Mercifully he could rely on Marion, who would be much more capable than Esther as helpmate and hostess at Government House. He had a very real affection for his only sister and a pleasant remembrance of their tour through India shortly after his mother's death; a tour that had been more than a mere orgy of scenery and ancient cities and big game. By keeping his wits alert, he had perceived much and inferred more. He

had made several distinguished acquaintances of both races and had kept in close touch with the country ever since.

Even in those days, when distrust was heresy, he had deeply distrusted German missionaries, German traders, and exalted German travellers in search of sport. He knew very well that affairs out there were more critical than the India Office cared to admit; that he would have to curb his incisive tongue and walk warily like a cat among bits of broken glass. And the knowledge stimulated him. He rose to a difficult occasion like a thoroughbred to a five-barred gate; and if he must leave Avonleigh, he liked nothing better than administrative work. He had enjoyed his fair share of it in Bermuda and New South Wales; and he was fortunate — under a Radical régime — to get another chance. He could pull through the five years with reasonable care; and when they were over, he would relish more than ever the abiding charm of this his own corner of England that was like a part of himself; dearer to him almost than any living being except the son for whom he held it in trust. . . .

He spent a satisfactory half-hour in going over his model almshouses: and a little before sunset he cantered homeward through the mellow stillness that brooded like an enchantment on moor and wood and field.

Before him loomed the pine-clad curve of Burnt Hill, fretting the gold like the teeth of a saw. On either side of him was open country, and in the flood of level light solitary trees seemed to stand spell-bound, holding their breath. In shadowy copices they huddled together like conspirators awaiting the given moment. Unshadowed fields opened their hearts to the splendour and the silence; for there was no sound anywhere but the rhythm of Royal's hoof-beats and the occasional flutter of an unseen bird. The whole earth was saturated with peace. Qualms and anxieties were mysteriously spirited away. . . .

Nearing the great gates, he spied another solitary figure ahead of him on the road: a figure with square-set shoulders, swinging along at a steady pace. For a while he watched it

abstractedly with the wistful envy of middle age for the boundless energy of youth. Then recognition flashed on him.

Where on earth had the boy sprung from? Had Esther, in her perturbation, forgotten to mention his return? And suddenly he had an inspiration — Why not Derek?

He recognized it, almost at once, as a counsel of despair. Derek was too young, too unsocial, too little amenable. Still, he clung to the idea. He felt a secret reluctance — which would never have been suspected by his family — to face five years' banishment unaccompanied by son, daughter, or wife. And he slackened speed to debate the matter with himself.

After all, Derek had brains and character, and a wider range of interests than Van. He might very well develop into a capable Private Secretary. But — what would he himself have to say to it?

Lord Avonleigh admitted that he had not the ghost of an idea. And the admission brought home to him, with unpleasant force, how little trouble he had taken to make the acquaintance of his own son. Well — here at any rate was a chance of getting to close quarters with the boy. Whether anything would come of it only Derek could decide.

Lord Avonleigh gave the reins a shake and trotted briskly towards that unknown human quantity — his second son.

CHAPTER III

*But we are cumbered with our egotisms;
A thousand prisms,
Hung round our souls, refract the single ray
That else would show us instantly the way.*

T. E. BROWN

AT the sound of hoofs behind him, Derek swung round, smiled in his sudden friendly fashion, and stood waiting for his father to come up with him.

"Confound me!" thought the Viscount, "I never even noticed what an engaging smile the fellow has."

"Hullo!" he said, dismounting and slipping an arm through Royal's bridle, "where have you dropped from?"

"Ashbourne," answered Derek.

"Does Mother know you're back?"

"I hope so. I wrote yesterday."

"That's all right. Had a good time?"

"A ripping time. Suits me — that sort of thing."

Lord Avonleigh glanced approvingly at his sunburnt face. "You look fit enough," he said. "I'm only just back from Town. And Mother didn't happen to mention you at tea-time. We had important matters to discuss." A pause. "Derek, Wyntoun has offered me the Governorship of Bombay."

Derek's prearranged start came off fairly well. "Bombay!" he echoed. "Are you going?"

"Yes. In a few weeks."

This time Derek's surprise was unfeigned. "I say! That's sharp work. Mother too?"

"No. Mother is not strong enough. She will be better — in England."

"Rather hard lines — on both of you."

There was tentative sympathy in Derek's tone. He wanted

to say more; but he had always a vague, uncomfortable sense of repression in his father's company. To-day the atmosphere seemed friendlier than usual; and with his own confession in view, he would have liked to make the most of it. But they were tied and bound by the chains of their disabilities. The bridge Lord Avonleigh had neglected to build could not be improvised at will. Just because the unexpected note of sympathy struck home, he found himself unable to answer his son's remark; and they walked on in silence through the great iron gates.

"Let me," Derek said, and put out a hand for Royal's rein.

Lord Avonleigh smiled. "Thanks, old boy. But he prefers it this way. *He'll* go out with me, if no one else does. I believe he'd fret if I left him. Animals are more given that way than — their superiors."

Something in his tone urged Derek to venture a personal question. "Father — are you keen to go?"

"It is a very great opportunity and — a great compliment," Lord Avonleigh answered in his dry, detached voice that made Derek fear he had been guilty of clumsy intrusion. "The situation out there is ticklish — therefore interesting. India is being unwisely hustled along the fatal path of democracy — in her case, peculiarly fatal. I haven't the arrogance to suppose I can prevent her Immoderates from running down a steep place into the sea: but at least one may be able to apply the brake. If Wyntoun thinks I'm qualified, it's worth having a try."

"Rather. I don't wonder you're keen." But he did wonder that his father should have vouchsafed him such an exhaustive answer to a personal question.

Lord Avonleigh walked on a few paces. Then: "How would you like to come out with me and have a hand in it, too?" he asked with one of his direct looks. "I could take you as my Private Secretary. Interesting work. You'd soon get the hang of it."

To say that Derek was taken aback is to give a shadowy idea of his sensations. He was more than amazed. He was deeply

moved. One clear thought smote through his confusion: "If only it had been yesterday!" Refusal seemed so ungracious, that he would have been tempted to accept and chance it — yesterday.

To-day — with the Great Experiment looming ahead — his slow, tenacious brain could not suddenly swing round to the opposite pole; neither could he forfeit in a flash those few extra years of independence and his whole underlying idea.

It seemed to him — and to his father — an age before he found his tongue.

"Of course — I'd like to go with you; and to see something of India," he began in a voice that tried to be natural. "But — I'm afraid I'd be precious little use — I should have thought . . . Van . . ."

"*His* qualifications go without saying." Lord Avonleigh's tone had hardened. He felt refusal in the air. "Unfortunately for me, it is not advisable that we should both be away from Avonleigh for so long on end."

Derek thought. "That accounts for it. I'm *faute de mieux*. I'd never satisfy him, if I tried ever so."

And his father thought: "He's just as bad as the others. Only considers himself." Aloud he said: "If *I'm* satisfied — where's the objection? You've been hawering long enough; and I gather that my proposal — broadly speaking — is not distasteful to you?"

"Of course not. But — it's the last thing I'd have dreamed of. Besides —"

His painful hesitation was so evident that Lord Avonleigh struck in: "My dear boy, don't feel bound to put yourself out as a favour to me."

It was not sarcastically meant; but long habit made Derek take it so. He reddened furiously.

"It's not likely I'd think of it that way," he said, goaded to frankness by pain and smothered temper. "Hasn't my brilliant talent for muddling things been rubbed into me — by all of you, ever since I was old enough to muddle anything? Is it surprising I should hesitate?"

"Altogether on my account?" The edge had gone from Lord Avonleigh's tone.

"No — not altogether," said truthful Derek, only half mollified. "I've got a notion of my own. You told me I'd better arrive at some conclusion this vac."

"And you have done so? I admit — I didn't expect it."

"*There* you are!" muttered Derek and checked himself. "But — you won't approve. So — in a way, you're right."

Lord Avonleigh glanced at the boy under his eyelids. He had never felt more strongly drawn to his younger son than at that moment. But he had never been affectionate with his boys; and Derek's pride was obviously up in arms.

"Am I to be allowed to hear the conclusion I shall not approve of?" he asked more gently; and his gentleness sounded to Derek like mock humility.

"I'm afraid I can't make things very clear, but — it's like this. I've crammed in a fair amount of book learning at Oxford. What I want now is — to get at facts — life. Not mere brain stuff; but the bedrock things . . . that you absorb through the pores of your skin." He hesitated and bit his lip. "That sounds like moonshine. I'm rotten at explaining. What I mean is that books are all very well — up to a point. But . . . it seems to me you can only get at men by knocking round the earth —" He broke off, painfully aware that his defence seemed lame and impotent without the deeper reasons hidden in his heart.

Lord Avonleigh's smile had the exasperating sapience of middle age that seems to say — "I've been taken that way too. Mere intellectual measles and whooping-cough." What he actually said was: "That depends —! Do you happen to have been studying 'The Apology for Idlers'?"

That gentle flick killed any impulse to further confidence. "You evidently don't understand, Father," Derek said with a touch of hauteur. "It's not idling I'm after. The notion is — well, I want to know a bit more about the Empire at first hand."

"Quite a laudable ambition. What's the ultimate objective? Parliament?"

"I hadn't thought of that. I'd like it well enough, though, if I saw the remotest chance of getting at the real thing. But they all seem too busy throwing mud at each other for the country to have much of a look in."

"The country, my dear Derek, is like a sick giant suffering from a plethora of doctors and an orgy of experiment. It may yet come to life again and kick them all to blazes."

"But you must experiment a bit if you want progress —"

Lord Avonleigh's quick brain pounced on a hidden connection.

"I hope you don't contemplate an orgy of it on the strength of a decent allowance?"

Again he saw the boy redden through his sunburn.

"Of course not. You might give me credit . . . It's simply . . . I want to get at realities." He hesitated, then plunged. — "To get outside the artificial limits of my own caste —"

"My good boy, the thing's impossible, unless you propose to shed your skin —"

"That's just what I won't admit," Derek began with a touch of heat: then checked himself and was silent.

His father was silent also; curious, half amused and wholly interested; awaiting further enlightenment. But the silence held, as they walked on up the noble sweep of the drive; and he perceived, with a stab of disappointment, that the boy — while talking 'moonshine' — evidently had some clear plan in his head which he could not or would not reveal. Nor was he, himself, the man to press for his son's confidence. Since he had not troubled to win it, he could not now, at the eleventh hour, force the shy and hidden thing. But at least he had a right to certain guarantees.

"Limits are tricky things even when they seem artificial," he remarked after due deliberation; "the temptation to disregard them comes to most men of character — some time. But they have an awkward knack of rounding on you in the end. Modern art ignores them. Consider the disastrous result! — Do you propose to disregard the artificial limit of time?"

Derek threw up his head. "I'm not *quite* such a fool as I seem to sound."

"I haven't said so, Derek, and I certainly haven't thought so. You sound rather mysterious and sketchy — that's all. How long do you give yourself?"

"How long will you give me?" Derek countered, smiling frankly now and speaking with less constraint. "I'd like three years — till I'm twenty-five. Perhaps less. But not more. And — if you suspect it's a sort of glorified slack I'm after, well" — a portentous pause — "you can stop my allowance."

"My dear chap — don't be a fool!" Lord Avonleigh said gruffly; and Derek preferred the gruffness to his silky sarcasms because it suggested deeper feeling. He had seen, in a flash, that here was the most he could offer in the way of credentials and had the satisfaction of knowing that his stroke had taken effect. He was also distinctly relieved.

"I meant it, though," he said quietly. "Thanks very much all the same for giving me that extent of rope —"

"To hang yourself with?"

Their eyes met in a half-defiant friendliness.

"I hope it won't come to that! I'll try not to make an unholy mess of things. And whatever kind of fool I may be — I won't forget . . . where I belong."

The last words came out hurriedly, almost casually, and his father — who quite understood — answered him in the same vein. "That's to say you *will* respect the limits — if it comes to a pinch. I thought as much. When do you intend to start?"

"Not till *you're* out of England."

The emphasis on the pronoun atoned for a good deal. They were nearing the house by now — and Lord Avonleigh left it at that.

The magical peace of evening that had calmed his troubled spirit was gone. But Derek, in his own fashion, had salved the wound made by his frank refusal, and in the process had thrust upon Lord Avonleigh the home truth that he had culpably overlooked his younger son. Being a just man, he recognized

that this afternoon's disappointment was the logical outcome of his own aloofness; and that the mere fact of fatherhood gave him no right of entry into the deeper places of his children's thoughts. God Himself knocks at that door.

But while Derek's obstinate reticence pricked his curiosity, he approved the boy's independent spirit and distaste for the sheep-track.

He was standing before his dressing-table while these thoughts strayed through his brain.

"Confounded carelessness on my part," he reflected, adjusting, with perfect precision, the set of his tie. "There's excuse for Esther. They haven't a thing in common. There's none for me. He's turning out more than ever like the dear old lady. She always said there was good stuff in him." And the dear old lady had a knack of being in the right. It was one of her most aggravating qualities.

At dinner Derek had less to say for himself than usual; while Esther, poor dear, was doing her ineffectual best to hide under a bushel of small talk the glow of her secret relief. It was Van's facile tongue that filled the gaps.

Though he could not pretend to more than a surface acquaintance with Indian affairs, he had a knack of using his half-knowledge with excellent effect. He also possessed the gift of drawing out his reticent father; a genuine achievement that gave almost equal satisfaction to them both, and possibly explained Lord Avonleigh's apparent blindness to the failings of his elder son.

To-night, when India was disposed of, they 'talked pavement' — as Derek put it — to their mutual entertainment; gossip of dinner tables, the Lobby and the Club. Every big brain has its foible; and Lord Avonleigh's satirical humour made him relish any incident of the human comedy that threw a flashlight on the frailties, delinquencies, or follies of his kind. And Van had a positive *flair* for stories that would tickle his father's palate; discreet stories for the dinner table that his lady mother could enjoy without turning a hair; indiscreet stories, of a racy flavour, to enliven their half-hour over wine and cigars. This

minor link between them had often stood him in good stead. Minor links play a major part in oiling the wheels of life.

To-night, when the three men had enjoyed their moderate fill, Lord Avonleigh took Van lightly by the arm.

"Come to the library," he said. "We must talk business. Tell mother we'll turn up later for bridge, Derek. You can amuse her meantime with your Tyrolean escapades."

Derek grimaced. "I'm afraid there weren't any worth jawing about," he said: and the two went off together.

When he entered the drawing-room his mother laid aside her paper and looked up with her polite smile of welcome. He caught himself wishing that there was less of the politeness and more of the welcome. She was still 'new' enough to make him feel acutely the lack of any real response.

"You look wonderfully well," she said, when he had delivered his message. "I suppose you had a very good time? You don't bestow much of your long vac. on Avonleigh."

She stated the fact quite pleasantly; but it was not the sort of remark to stimulate conversation.

"No loss for Avonleigh!" he retorted with a quick look that recalled his father. "And it's one's only chance for a walking tour."

"Well — was it a great success?" She picked up a green silk tie she was knitting for Van and resigned herself to details.

"Yes. It was ripping," Derek remarked, staring at the fire. "Grand scenery. The finest I've ever struck. And we were in luck with our weather."

"A most important point," she murmured with conviction. "It's the damp makes that sort of thing so risky. I can't quite see, myself, where the pleasure comes in. I hope you took your Burberry?"

"We had an old one of Jack's between us," Derek informed her gravely. "It came in quite handy once — on a blazing hot day."

Lady Avonleigh looked vaguely perplexed. Derek had his father's annoying trick of saying nonsensical things with an unmoved face, so that you never knew whether you were ex-

pected to smile or not. She supposed she had misheard him and pursued her catechism.

"Were you simply walking all the time?"

"Most of the time — when we weren't sleeping or eating."

"It doesn't sound very amusing — or edifying."

"Oh, but it *was* — hugely edifying. And no end of a lark."

He did not volunteer concrete proofs of either statement; and she went on patiently with her knitting, though she was longing to finish the account of a fashionable wedding that lay at her elbow.

Derek — discouraged by her silence — was craving for a pipe. The longer the pause lasted, the harder he found it to start afresh. Every remark that occurred to him seemed more inane than the last. And to sit there, tongue-tied, made him feel a perfect fool. There were many little things he would like to tell her, if she would only give the slightest sign of caring to hear them. Also, he wanted to express his sympathy about India; but felt too uncertain of her real wishes in the matter to venture on such delicate ground. It was significant of their whole relation that he did not think of mentioning his father's offer or his own decision to leave England.

Why did her mere presence hang a dead weight on him so that he could not be his natural self? Was it his own incurable keenness to see her again that made the actuality so flat by contrast?

And yet — she looked so charming, so dignified, sitting there in her velvet gown, with the rose-shaded light falling on her smooth hair and her long fingers moving rhythmically to and fro. She was always knitting ties for Van. The only one she ever made for him he had worn devoutly till it became a faded, unsightly rag. And even then he had not thrown it away. It reposed in his tie case still.

Absorbed in these thoughts, he forgot his futile hunt for the right remark. A very small sound, the ghost of a sigh, reminded him that the silence had lasted an age — about five minutes by the clock. Then, just as a happy idea struck him,

he saw her glance wistfully at the discarded paper: and the sight tripped him up altogether. He thought: "Poor dear! She's deadly bored! Longing to read." And to give her a chance he began turning over the leaves of a book that lay on a small table near him.

At that she laid down her work and regarded him with mild exasperation.

"Really, Derek!" she said. "Have you *quite* lost your manners? Here am I, waiting to hear some more. And after a few stupid remarks about the scenery and the weather, you start reading a book. As you say you enjoyed yourself, you might be a little more explicit for the benefit of others."

The injustice of it all — though quite unwitting — goaded Derek into some show of self-defence.

"Well, I'm willing — if you really care to hear. I was afraid if I began to spread myself, you'd be bored stiff and be too polite to show it. And just now . . . the way you looked at the paper . . . I felt I was simply being a nuisance. So I took up this beastly book. Honour bright, I don't know what it's about — and I don't care a damn!"

"Derek! In my drawing-room!"

"Oh, I'm sorry. I do seem to have dropped my manners somewhere on the Brenner Pass! But if you *want* to read, Mother, I'd much rather you said so."

"I don't want to read." Having arraigned him, she mendaciously stuck to her guns. "It was only — Lady Mary Rose's wedding. And I'd like to hear a little more about your doings before they come in."

"All right," he said, and proceeded to do his halting best.

For half an hour or so things went swimmingly. Derek warmed to his subject; and if her comments flagged a little, he scarcely noticed it. He was well launched on their crowning tramp over the Brenner Pass when, by unlucky chance, he detected her gracefully screening a yawn. That tripped him up again and brought the great tramp rather abruptly to an end. But he managed it well enough to escape counter-detection. Then he rose and went over to the fire.

"I'm sure you've had enough of my doings," he said casually.
"You'd much better go back to your wedding presents!"

She looked up at him, the ghost of a suspicion in her eyes:
and they were both thankful to hear voices outside the door.

Derek lost no time in finding an excuse to escape.

"Sorry if I bored you, Mother," he said, just touching her
ivory-smooth forehead with his lips. "But you brought it on
yourself."

"Stupid boy!" she rebuked him sweetly, and patted his arm.
"It was most interesting. I quite enjoyed it."

Derek grimaced. It always worried him that, in the sacred
name of politeness, she would tell needless lies.

Van had opened the card-table and Lord Avonleigh was
shuffling. Derek stood by him a moment looking on; then
touched his shoulder.

"Good-night, Father," he said; and Lord Avonleigh looked
up, a twinkle in his eye. "Going to bed? I don't think!"

"No, I'm going to have a read in the study."

"Unsociable cub! Why not stay and take a hand? Cut-
throat bridge is poor fun."

Derek felt nonplussed. His abstention from bridge was part
of the accepted order of things. It was a purely protective
disability; and no one troubled about it when Ina was at home.
At any other time he would have frankly excused himself; but
to-night compunction stirred in him and he temporized.

"What's the use, Father? You know I'm a duffer at it.
You'd all be wanting to cut *my* throat before the rubber was
out!"

"That's quite possible. But, whatever the provocation, we
promise to abstain! Esther"—he raised his voice a little—
"you promise to abstain?"

Lady Avonleigh, who had not been attending, looked a little
blank. "My dear Evan, what *are* you talking about? You
know I only take it medicinally."

Van was seized with a discreet fit of coughing, and Derek
bit his lip. Lord Avonleigh's muscles from long practice were
under better control.

"Van, behave yourself!" he said *sotto voce*, then turned to his wife. "I was suggesting, my dear, that we should take Derek medicinally for our convenience and his good. He's too modest by half."

"Well, if he doesn't want to play — he won't. Why worry him?" she said sweetly; and Derek heartily wished he could take her at her word.

"Ah! that's the way you've spoilt him, Esther!"

But she was impervious to irony. "I'm sure no one could ever say I spoilt my children," she retorted with serene complacence and perfect truth. "I wish you'd stop talking nonsense. I thought we were going to play bridge. Sit down, Derek, if you want to stay; and do try and remember what are trumps."

They cut for partners. Derek put up a prayer that Van might fall to his lot; but his prayers were seldom answered. The cards consigned him to his mother — and he changed places with Van.

"Kick me if I look like forgetting what's trumps," he muttered with a wry smile.

But if he avoided that elementary sin, there were pitfalls in plenty for the absent-minded; and Derek — no card-player — was incurably absent-minded at bridge. To-night he was still further hampered by pin-pricks of remorse at having withheld his true reason for refusing India. Once he failed to notice his mother's call in clubs. Once he misled her by playing from a weak suit, in a purely perverse spirit of experiment — just to see what would come of it.

Disaster came of it, and Lady Avonleigh's not unnatural apostrophe: "Really, Derek, you are *too* stupid!"

Finally he revoked and she almost flung down her cards. Needless to say they were beaten ignominiously.

Derek pushed back his chair. "I'm awfully sorry, Mother," he said in a repressed voice; but it was Lord Avonleigh who answered him.

"My fault for over-persuading you."

"Well, I said I was useless — a duffer."

"And you went out of your way to prove it?"

Their eyes met; and the sense of a double significance flashed between them.

"No need for that, worse luck," Derek said ruefully. "It's the way I'm made."

"There are limits, in fact!" Lord Avonleigh reminded him, a gleam in his grave eyes. "Well, we won't victimize you—or Mother any more."

Derek rose with so audible a sigh of relief that Van winked at him over Lady Avonleigh's graceful bowed head. She was pensively shuffling; bored with the interlude; not heeding their talk.

Derek did not kiss her again. As for his father — though he knew young men of his own age who thought no shame of it — he could not remember having kissed him since his first home coming from Winchester. On that occasion his natural impulse of affection had been checked by the remark that he was getting too old for nursery ways.

"Blounts don't kiss," he had been gravely informed; and — though a twinkle lurked in the gravity — it was literally true.

CHAPTER IV

*In a time of sceptic moths and cynic rusts,
And fatted lives, that of their sweetness tire,
In a world of flying loves and fading lusts,
It is something to be sure of a desire.*

CHESTERTON

ON Saturday afternoon guests began to arrive; and they sat down twelve to dinner that evening. It was little more than a family party. The big shooting week-ends began with the pheasants in October. Meantime there were partridges. There were golf and tennis, billiards and bridge to save twentieth-century guests and hosts from the burden of making conversation. There were the famous Avonleigh port and liqueur brandy; the scarcely less famous grapes and pears; and last, not least, there was that all-pervading sense of stability and comfort, with no jarring note of ostentation to spoil the harmony of the whole.

From this it may be gathered that, physically and socially, a week-end at Avonleigh Hall left little to be desired; yet among the county neighbours were certain perverse spirits — Lady Forsyth, for instance, and Lady Lenox — who found the human atmosphere of its stately draught-proof rooms a trifle chilly and its gracious, punctilious hostess more than a trifle dull. Hence the adjunct of the plain daughter — who so upset Van — whenever Sir Eldred came to stay with his friend. But no shadow of suspicion disturbed Lady Avonleigh. She never dreamed that man or woman could find her hospitality anything but acceptable. She had a mild liking for Sir Eldred, who treated her with marked courtesy; partly to atone for Quita's defection, partly because she was the wife of his friend.

The two men had much in common. Both — wife and chil-

dren, notwithstanding — were creatures of the lone trail; both took a keen interest in county affairs. They were still further linked by a taste for local archaeology; and Lenox was amassing material for a joint book on the subject. To him the Bombay appointment was a blow; but he was putting a cheerful face on it. And at dinner he tried, for his friend's sake, to interest Lady Avonleigh in Indian affairs.

His daughter — a plain but pleasing replica of himself — seemed in no way over-awed by her slightly formidable host, who had a real affection for her. "A fine manly girl!" he would say with his twinkle at Van; and it was not altogether the perversity of a parent that made her seem more accessible than his own Ina, whose bright surface was scarcely more yielding than the surface of a billiard ball. Presumably her K. C. had discovered a soft spot somewhere: but, judging by appearances, they were as unsentimental and practical a pair of lovers as even the twentieth century can produce. One could watch them without the faintest risk of trespassing on private ground.

They were sitting together, opposite Derek, who had not yet seen the new acquisition, and had felt vaguely sorry for him. Now he perceived that his pity, besides being unbrotherly, was superfluous to wit. Ferrars — that was the K. C.'s name — looked as if he might prove a match for the girl who had graciously consented to bear his name and share his income and shine in his reflected brilliance. He was quite ten years her senior. He had the flat lip, the mobile mouth and undeviating eye of the successful Man of Law. He enjoyed intimacy with political stars of the first magnitude. "And his friends say he may rise to *anything*," Ina had confided to Derek half an hour before dinner with a metallic sparkle in her eyes. He, on his part, would have the honour and privilege of marrying a Blount of Avonleigh. A thundering good business proposition, Derek concluded, with a touch of young cynicism. Well — so long as they were satisfied —

And they certainly looked it. Derek, being partnerless, with young Schonberg on one side and Marion Blount on the other

— was not distinguishing himself conversationally. Karl was half English, half German, and a pleasant fellow enough; but, in spite of his frequent visits to Avonleigh, the two had never approached intimacy.

At the moment, he was arguing across the table with Van, and Marion Blount was absorbed in her French count; so Derek had leisure to observe the new element and to wonder at the apparent readiness with which even independent men and women slipped their necks under the fatal yoke. Marriage, dispassionately viewed, seemed to him the most insidious and inflexible of all the shackles that constrain the human soul. “And what shall a man give in exchange for his soul — ?”

“Well, Derek, when *are* you going to wake up and talk to me?” Aunt Marion’s voice, friendly but incisive, broke the thread of his thoughts. “You have no dinner-table manners whatever.”

Derek, at the onset, had frowned and blinked as if a light had been flashed in his eyes. He was a bad subject for direct attack; apt to roll himself up like a hedgehog and present a surface of prickles to his assailant. But the Honourable Marion Blount was nothing if not direct. Her decisive features proclaimed as much; and her hazel eyes — deep-set like her brother’s — had something of their hawk-like gleam.

“I’m awfully sorry,” Derek apologized gruffly. He looked and sounded so far from contrite that she laughed and inflicted an ‘ant’s nip’ on the back of his hand.

“All the same, I’m very angry with you,” she went on, under cover of the general buzz of talk. “Your father tells me he offered to take you with him — and you *refused!*”

Derek winced under his prickles. He thought: “How like a woman; bringing it up in this crowd!” And he said rather stiffly: “It was hard luck — on both of us. But — it wouldn’t have worked. I can’t explain. And I can’t help it if you *are* angry. You don’t understand. But I believe — anyway — Father does.”

“Your father understands this much,” his aunt retorted unabashed, “that you can all be counted to go your own ways without troubling your heads about him or any one else in creation — even his own wife — ”

"Mother?" Derek took her up sharply. "You're not fair on her—ever. You don't make allowances. Father says it would be a risk."

"*She* says so, my dear boy. And he shields her, like the gentleman he is." Her tone was less incisive now. Its quietness carried conviction. And conviction made Derek angrier still.

"If *he* shields her, how dare you —!" he checked himself. "How can you know?"

"Because he is my brother, and for me there is no one like him in the world." Her voice grew quieter still so that he could hardly hear her through the clatter and chatter, the lively volley of chaff kept up by Jack and Ina, Karl and Van. "He doesn't need to tell me things. I know him as none of you do—or ever will."

Thus goaded, Derek ventured a bold question. "Is that altogether our fault? Does he give us much of a chance?"

"No. He's a difficult creature. But—underneath, he's splendid. He says hard and cutting things, I admit. But when it comes to action, he's far too patient with you all. As for risk —! He talks about her. No one thinks of the risk for him."

"For *him*?" Derek's heart stood still. There were no prickles to contend with now. "What's wrong? I didn't know —"

"Of course not. You aren't supposed to. I'm not supposed to. But I do. And—your mother does, as far as she ever lets herself know anything that is likely to make her uncomfortable."

"Oh — don't!"

She caught the pain in his low tone and flashed a smile at him. "You're a loyal son! Anyway, *I* can see that he's keen to have one of you with him. And it tells me more than he imagines."

That was too much for Derek.

"Aunt Marion, I'd never have refused if I'd guessed. And—I'm willing to go now, if it's — if there's —"

He broke off, checked by an embarrassing sense of publicity — though no one heeded them: and she turned on him with a sudden softening.

"I'm glad to know that, Derek. But — I doubt the wisdom of seeming to go back on your decision. It might look like mere wobbling. Or — he might suspect. He's got his other eye on us now. And I don't want to spoil things. I'm so enchanted to be going. I'll see after him. Never fear. I want him to take Van. But I believe he knows Van would refuse: and he won't face that. Really you are *the* most detached family —! Each twiddling on your own pivot — self-centred —"

"Am I self-centred?" Derek struck in.

"Not so bad as the rest. But still — look at you, over this business."

Derek sighed. "That's not fair. I — well — if we are not seeming to care, who made us that way? Aren't you a Blount yourself?"

"Very much so. And 'Blounts don't kiss'! I know all about that. We're hard outside and soft underneath. And your mother's the other way round."

"Mother's *not* hard."

"Isn't she? Bless the boy! Well, if you prefer it, she's smilingly immobile where her own interests are concerned."

Derek said nothing. The talk was dying down. Personalities were no longer safe: and at that moment Ferrars engaged Miss Blount in conversation across the table. He had been discussing with Comte d'Estelle the relations between German sensibilities and German self-assertion: and Ina — frankly bored with racial idiosyncrasies — turned her batteries full on Jack Burlton, whom Derek intended to annex for serious conversation on the first opportunity.

The official evening, divided between billiards and bridge, offered small chance for intimate talk. But the moment Jervis appeared with 'drinks,' Derek made his escape, closely followed by Jack.

"I'll come in and raid you, old man, when I've got rid of

the world's fetters," he said, as they halted outside Jack's room.

Five minutes later, he reappeared in a luxuriously soft camel's hair dressing-gown, settled himself on Jack's bed and explored a capacious pocket for pipe and pouch. Jack, in striped silk trousers and vest, was at the washing stand.

"I got a scrawl from Gay yesterday," he informed Derek from the depths of a vast sponge. "Posted at Southampton. It was the most beastly rotten luck missing her by the skin of my teeth."

"Well, you blithering idiot, if you'd only told me —!"

Jack turned on him a moist, glowing face of reproach.

"I like that, when I was simply thinking of you and your old München. Isn't she simply topping?"

Derek smiled. "She's charming. The way she hailed me out of the window made a deep impression on our fellow passengers! Was her father French-Canadian? She spoke of cousins."

"Not close cousins. Her father was pure French. But he had connections out there, who took him into their business. Gay was born at Montreal: and she has a married aunt there now, fearfully keen on her. They came home a few years ago; and they've been bothering her to go out ever since. But she wouldn't leave Mother. Now — Mother's gone, they've got her, worse luck!"

"For long?"

"Hope not. But it's more than a visit. If they show any signs of freezing on to her, they'll have me to reckon with!"

"A tough proposition!" Derek remarked, gravely considering Jack's splendid appearance in his silk sleeping suit, with the light shining full upon his sleek brown hair, quaintly emphasizing the tilt of his genial nose and the dimple in his chin to which even his best friends alluded at their peril. And few cared about taking the risk. For there was more than six feet of him with thews and muscles to correspond. He was not yet twenty-one; and at the moment he reminded Derek of a large good-humoured St. Bernard puppy.

He was trying hard to look tragic, but his whole make-up was against him. "Everything's beastly all round," he flung out. "Her confounded people might have waited till the Army had swallowed me. Home'll be simply rotten without her. Thank God for Oxford anyway — and your fourth year. No more havering about that, I hope?"

"No more havering — and no more Oxford."

Jack flung down the ivory brushes with which he was quite superfluously polishing his hair. "Well you *are* —! Why the dickens —?"

"Well — it's just a notion. Rather a drastic one. It's going to take me to the ends of the earth and knock a few years out of my life as an average English gentleman — and I warn you it's an *idée fixe*. So you needn't exhaust yourself by hurling epithets at me."

"Thanks very much — and all that. But what's at the back of it? May a mere outsider be permitted to know?"

Derek drew himself up. "After that, I'm blest if I don't give you three guesses and tell you which is the right one — to-morrow morning."

"And I'm damned if you do!"

Jack spoke quite coolly; but, almost in the same breath, he hurled himself on Derek, who went clean over. For several minutes they rolled and scrimmaged like a pair of puppies, fighting for all they were worth. Though Derek had the greater skill, he was badly hampered by his dressing-gown and the fact that he was under dog.

In the end, he found himself ignominiously pinned to the bed, while Jack knelt above him demanding information.

"Deliver the goods, you secretive villain — or I'll choke the life out of you!" was the mild manner of his request.

"Right you are! Pax!" Derek panted and wrenched himself free. "Nice sort of way to treat your lawful host! Get into bed like a good little boy. Light up and give me a chance."

He did not hurry over the pipe preliminaries. He saw the whole thing quite clearly from Jack's point of view; but it was not in him either to exalt his precious scheme or enthuse over

it. So he sat there, arms folded on hunched-up knees, and made the best he could of a difficult business.

Jack listened in growing wonderment, his eyes fixed on Derek's face.

"Comment is superfluous," he remarked impressively when the tale was told. "And what has 'the noble lord' to say to all that?"

"The noble lord hasn't heard all that. But I made things as clear as I could; and he was jolly decent about it. Didn't press for details. Thank Heaven, as a family, we respect each other's reserves. There was only one horrid jar. He wanted me to go out with him as Private Secretary — or some such desperate character. Well — I felt I couldn't. And I had to tell him so. And I simply hated it."

Jack's jaw dropped half an inch. "You chucked a chance like that? Your own father, too! Dirks, you *are* a sanguinary fool."

Derek regarded him pensively, without rancour. "Thought that would be your lucid summing-up of the situation."

They were silent a few moments: Derek remembering, with a pang, Aunt Marion's talk at dinner; Jack interested, sceptical, yet aware of lurking admiration. Derek certainly had the courage of his crazy convictions.

"Oh, Lord!" he groaned, tossing his cigarette end into the grate. "Why on earth do things go so contrary? I'd give my eyes for that sort of job. India, sport — the whole blooming show. And you, that can have the lot, going out steerage. Rubbing shoulders with a herd of swearing, spitting bargees. Filthy food. Filthy talk. My hat!" He paused — realizing details. "It begins to dawn on me that you're rather a splendid sort of fool —"

"Oh, dry up," Derek said sharply; and Jack, aware that he had sinned, meekly accepted the rebuke.

"When do you start on this personally conducted tour?"

"At the end of next month."

"Bo-hoo!" The boy's foolish grimace cloaked a very real sinking of the heart. "And I'm to be left lamenting! Oxford,

with no Dirks. Home, with no Gay. And my poor old guv'nor sitting like a ton of coals on my chest — Gay says she mentioned it —"

"Yes. She seemed anxious."

Jack nodded. "So am I."

"That's the first *I've* heard of it — and the talks we had out there."

"Well — I didn't want to be a spoil-sport, when you couldn't escape my charming society. But I'm jolly glad Gay did speak to you."

"It was no more than a hint. What's the damage?"

"Wish to God I knew. But there's no blinking the fact the dear old Dad's not the man he was — financially or otherwise. The proud notion that I was to adorn a crack cavalry regiment seems to have melted away. And every vac. we're favoured with increased doses of old Schonberg, Mrs. Schonberg and all the little Schonbergs, till we're on the verge of mutiny."

"Poor old Jacko!" Derek's tone was gravely sympathetic. "And do you really imagine Schonberg has any connection with the bad turn things are taking?"

Jack sighed portentously. "I do more than imagine. I feel it in my bones — and so does Gay — that the old devil is a blood-sucker. He's got his fingers in no end of commercial pies. I know he's connected with the big Metal Combine. And he has some sort of footing in that blooming old Deutsche Bank, which he talks of as if it was God Almighty. Also I believe he runs a hotel on the East Coast — and Lord knows what else. He must be simply made of money; though he doesn't live like it at Randchester. As to his connection with our rotten luck — well, out there I got a sort of notion" — He leaned suddenly forward, his good-tempered face tense and earnest. "I got it off the foreman of that Italian gang on the line. You remember, we had a long jawbation —"

"About the Germans in Italy — yes."

"Well, I didn't tell you half he said, because it gave me horrid tweaks. I wanted to talk it out with Gay. And now she's gone, I can't keep it bottled up any more. That fellow de-

clares the Germans are rotting Italian trade — secretly getting all the strings into their own hands. I couldn't follow half the stuff he talked about 'key industries' and all that; but I gathered that their beastly banks have a lot to do with it. Advance money and that sort of game. He told me a long yarn about his brother's glass-making business in Florence: how it was slowly undermined and ruined; and then swallowed up by a big German business that brought the whole thing to life again in no time. Glass, it seems, is what they call a 'key' industry — *so's metal!*"

There was a significant pause, then Jack said slowly: "Doesn't the parallel strike you?"

Derek scowled thoughtfully at the bowl of his pipe. "That's rather tall," he said at last.

"Think so? Well — listen what happened, when I got home, to calm my foolish fears. I found the guv'nor in a queer mood. And the very first evening he started talking of his own affairs, which isn't his habit, by any means. I gathered that for some time things have been on the down grade; just slipping and slipping — No big losses. If there had been, he might have pulled himself together. But he's a slow mover, and his faith in Burltons is about all he's got in the way of religion. I felt frightfully sorry for him, poor old chap. And just a shade sorry for myself. For he hinted at cutting down my allowance and little practical jokes of that sort. Then, when he'd thoroughly worked up my feelings, he pitched in his final bomb-shell."

Again the boy had a dramatic pause. "Schonberg to the rescue. Now—doesn't the parallel hit you between the eyes?"

"Looks fishy," Derek agreed. "And what form is the rescue to take?"

"Oh, he'll prop up the firm financially by the grace of his old Deutsche Bank. Boom it among his influential friends in the City. Probably flood it with German shareholders. And it's to be 'Burlton and Schonberg Ltd.' The fellow's got us fairly on our knees."

"It's simply beastly," Derek broke out. "But if we *will*

let our business world get over-run with foreigners —! And your father doesn't object?"

"I wish to God he did! The sheer relief of it blinds him to everything else. Also his faith in Schonberg. I told him straight he was selling himself to the devil; that the whole concern would soon be German from top to bottom. I know, for a fact, that the works are flooded out with German engineers and accountants and clerks. Cheaper and more docile, the guv'nor says. *I* say — just one of their dodges for preparing the ground. I told him he could halve my allowance, that I'd chuck the Army and go into any old hole; and I knew the kids would put up with things in the same spirit. I frankly informed him he was as blind as an owl in daylight where Schonberg and Co. were concerned. But d'you suppose it was a mite of use?"

Derek didn't suppose so. But, even in this tragic emergency, his first thought was: "What on earth would happen if I let out like that to Father?" Aloud he said: "I expect you got back a Roland for your Oliver — a 'young fool' for your 'old owl'!"

Jack assented gloomily. "That's the curse of it. Old owls have such an unfair pull, even if, by some amazing chance, the young fools happen to be in the right. Because he once knew one kind of Germany, he can't, or won't, believe there's another kind that we're mostly getting over here. We under-grads know a thing or two about the German professors and modern German education — don't we? But where's the damned use of knowing *anything* when you only get called a fool for your pains?"

Bitterness was so foreign to Jack's whole nature that this last made a deeper impression on Derek than all that had gone before. But he had small skill in expressing sympathy.

"It's a disease we're safe to grow out of," he remarked consolingly.

"Yes — when it's too late to be any use. And then we'll be on the way to becoming old owls ourselves."

Before that awful prospect they were both silent. Then Jack heaved another portentous sigh.

"There! I'm through. Thanks awfully, Dirks, for putting up with me. It's been no end of a relief. I shall go for Indian Cavalry, if Home Cavalry can't be did. Blowed if I touch Schonberg's money. — You might open another window, old chap. The room's reeking; and I don't want to be in your lady mother's black books."

Derek rose and stretched himself. "No fear! I'm a chronic offender. Old Con won't give us away."

As he went past the bed, Jack flung out a hand and Derek's closed upon it vigorously, without a word.

CHAPTER V

*I am at ease now: worldly, in this world,
I take and like its way of life: I think
My brothers, who administer the means,
Live better for my comfort — that's good too.*

BROWNING

THE heir of Avonleigh was troubled in spirit; not because his father would soon be leaving England, but because the proud load of responsibility for Avonleigh, and the smaller estate of Trevanyon on the Cornish border, would then rest on his own shoulders. And Van had so little taste for responsibility that he would make a long circuit to evade it. Even while he listened to Lord Avonleigh's announcement, that Friday evening, he had been instinctively casting about in his mind for ways and means to that end: and on Saturday night an inspiration arrived.

It consisted of a single word — Karl.

While Jack, on one side of the wall, was cursing the father, Van, on the other, was thanking Providence for the son. Could he have overheard Jack's tale, he would probably have been moved to good-humoured scepticism; or, like Burlton, would have fortified himself against suspicion by dismissing him as a young fool. And in both cases the instinct sprang from the same root.

To outward appearance there seemed little enough in common between the young Oxford intellectual and the middle-aged business man: yet, in both, the slippared ease of mental and spiritual security prevailed over the love of truth. By different routes, they had reached the same terminus; and of both it may safely be said that they would sooner hug a comfortable illusion than suffer the discomposure of a mental spring cleaning. So each, in his own characteristic fashion, unwittingly assisted the march of Fate.

Van, it must be owned, had no earthly reason to distrust young Schonberg. The two had gone up to Balliol the same year: Van from Eton; Karl, as a science scholar from Harrow. A mutual taste for music and sheer temperamental antithesis had drawn them together.

Karl was assiduous in the pursuit of knowledge. Van had never been assiduous in the pursuit of anything — except a pretty woman. Yet he was potentially the cleverer of the two. He possessed a fair share of his father's fine mentality, blanketed by the intellectual apathy of his mother; and he was apt to get more credit for his buried talents than those who made the most of lesser gifts. At Eton he had achieved little beyond a wide popularity and a certain distinction in the cricket-field. At Oxford — well, at Oxford, there were the boats and breakfast parties and dinners and Union debates, and billiards, and sentimental summer evenings in a backwater, with the pretty girl of the moment; — in fact, every conceivable inducement to cultivate his most expensive tastes. So schools and lectures had been rather in the way. Happily lectures could be cut; and that seemed to be their *raison d'être* in the set to which he had gravitated by the law of human magnetism.

It was Karl who had first shaken the comfortable conviction that this kind of thing was not the highroad to honours; and Van coveted honours for the credit of the family. Karl did not cut lectures to any extent; and, as they grew more intimate, Van would discover that on convivial nights — while he had been dancing and drinking unlimited champagne Karl had been sitting up with a pipe and strong coffee and a pile of books on physical science.

"I've told my father I shall take a First; and I intend to do so," was his justification of this unorthodox behaviour, to which Van objected on principle; partly because it was inconvenient; chiefly because it seemed a tacit reflection on himself. So he had taken a perverse pleasure in luring his friend from the path of virtue: no such hard matter once he discovered the weak links in his armour — music and women. Karl was amorous and sentimental; and at banquets or 'blinds,' when he

reached the stage of 'having drink taken,' he was the best company in the world.

But in the middle of his second year, his Teutonic brain reasserted itself; and there had been something like a scene. It was Karl's declaration of independence; and it had the unlooked-for effect of spurring Van to up and convince his friend that a Blount could shine with the best of them if he chose. But, like the hare in the fable, he had slept too long. He succeeded in winning the Newdigate. In the schools, he had to be content with a Second, while Karl secured his First.

His disappointment had been keen and galling; but he had consoled himself with the reflection that at last the troublesome process of education had come to an end for good. The idea that it could, or should, be a lifelong process had never visited his brain. That was the fundamental difference between himself and Derek. In Van's eyes, Eton and Balliol were simply caste marks of the first order; hence their intrinsic value.

As for Karl, though he loved the grey city of spires, he tended to see it as a sort of intellectual farmyard, where brains were scientifically crammed for degrees that were practical means to an end. After Oxford, he had gone to the German School of Forestry at Asschaffenburg, where he filled a fresh set of mental pigeon-holes; and from forestry his untiring brain had passed on to the problems of scientific agriculture. Under the tutelage of a first-class land agent, he had done such good work that already he himself aspired to an agency; which sane and modest ambition Van had been suddenly moved to fulfil.

The more he looked at his inspiration the better pleased he felt with himself and it. To dethrone Malcolm was, unluckily, impossible; Lord Avonleigh's faith in the man was implicit; and so any step towards limiting his sphere of influence would have to be cautiously taken. But the idea of Karl as his lieutenant was so alluring that no minor considerations could be allowed to thwart it.

Moreover, his flattering offer might serve to oil the wheels of things. For there were unsettled scores between these two that intermittently worried Van's not too exacting conscience:

and Karl had been known to make disconcerting remarks. An appointment, with a good salary out of his father's pocket, could scarcely be twisted, even by Van, into the payment of his own private debt; but it would ease his mind to do Karl a service that would incidentally be a boon to himself. He would spring the proposal on him to-morrow. And there was a certain fifty pounds, dating from a good while back. It might be as well to pay that off; an earnest of more to follow when the convenient moment arrived.

Sunday was always a quiet day at Avonleigh. Its sacred character was officially recognized, though individuals were free to disregard it if they chose. Derek and Jack unhesitatingly did choose. They were already in the saddle while the rest of the party were still standing about round the log fire in the hall — the friendliest gathering place in the whole house — with its vast armchairs, oak settees, and Persian rugs; its portraits of bygone Blounts and its unique collection of mediaeval armour.

Outside, it was a morning to charm away the blackest shadow of care that ever sat behind a horseman: and when the elders drove off to Ashbourne Church, Van and Karl drifted into the billiard room. Both were inveterate players; and the billiard table was responsible for a good many of those awkward corners that had left Van so deeply indebted to his friend. Thanks mainly to Karl's backing, he had won through his four years at Oxford with no more than a mere hillock of debt — visible to the naked eye. For he set great store by his home halo; and did his best to keep it bright.

They played one closely contested game before Van sprang his inspiration on the unsuspecting Karl. Then, as he clicked the ivory markers back into position, he asked conversationally: "Have you done any more about that job you mentioned last week?"

"No. It's in Norfolk. A biggish place. Good money. But I'm not dead keen."

He spoke absently, in jerks. He was moving round the table, making cannons of the silkiest softness at impossible

angles; and Van, having lit a cigarette, stood watching him, fascinated by his uncanny accuracy of hand and eye.

Externally, there was little of the Teuton about Karl, except for his prominent, light-blue eyes and a slight thickness about the full view of his nostrils and lips. In profile, his nose was straight and comely. His moustache studiously refrained from any upward curve, and his thatch of straw-coloured hair was brushed backwards in correct fashion, from a remarkably capable forehead. His dress and manners bore the Public School and University stamp — a stamp it had become the fashion to deride before it proved itself, on battlefields and in training camps, the hall-mark of the race.

"When you say 'a biggish place,'" Van remarked, after his silence, "d'you mean anywhere near the size of this?"

"Lord, no! A man doesn't expect to start at the top of the tree."

"Sometimes he can start a good way up, if he's lucky enough to have exceptional capacity — and friends in the right quarter."

At that Karl left off making cannons, and looked hard at Van, who leaned against the window frame caressing his moustache.

"What are you getting at?"

Van looked back at him with his most engaging smile. "What I'd like to be getting at is the chance of harnessing your exceptional capacity to the woods and fields of Avonleigh, which you said yourself, last week, would repay more scientific handling."

Karl's grunt of astonishment was emphasized by the thud of his cue on the carpet.

"You mean me to take that seriously?"

"Why not? I wasn't perpetrating a ponderous joke."

"But, my dear chap — in the first place there isn't a vacancy; in the second, I'm not exactly *persona grata* with your father—"

"My father leaves for India next month. He'll be gone five years," Van announced with his faint drawl; and seating himself on the cushioned sill he proceeded to unfold the situation.

Karl listened, half perched on the rim of the billiard table, thoughtfully swinging one foot.

"So you see," Van concluded with a Jove-like nod, "I shall be pretty well master here — for a good spell. 'Course I can't shift Malcolm altogether. But I'm out for up-to-date improvements; and I'll need an intelligent expert like yourself to back me up. A sort of *locum tenens*. You don't catch *me* vegetating at Avonleigh. And as you've a natural taste for the country, the whole thing dovetails rather neatly — what?"

Karl sucked in his lips and released them with a smack; an ugly trick that always annoyed Van.

"Naturally, I'd like to work for you; and being here so much, I've observed things a bit. But — surely you need some one more experienced?"

"Oh, of course if you're such a modest violet I must look elsewhere." Van's tone was noticeably cooler. Karl's caution and lack of enthusiasm hurt his vanity.

"You seem in a mighty hurry to chuck me!" that young man remarked with perfect good-humour.

"Chuck you? Why, you won't even look at my offer."

"Don't be a bally ass, Van. I'm staring at it with all my eyes."

He slipped off the table and seated himself in the window.

Van proffered cigarettes. "Russians," he said.

Karl helped himself. "Have you spoken to Lord Avonleigh?"

"No. I only thought of it last night."

"D'you suppose — he would approve?"

"I really don't know. He might get worrying for fear it should make friction. But I've every right to choose my man, so long as I respect his sacred Malcolm. I want some one on the spot who stands for me. I doubt if I'll give up the F. O. job. It's interesting. Keeps you in the know. A week-end with the pheasants, an occasional tour of inspection, and a roaring house-party for Christmas — that's about the ticket. I can work my mother once I get her to myself. I shall set her up in Avonleigh House and she'll soon be wondering how she ever stood living out of Town —"

Karl's sympathetic smile was tinged with amusement. "You evidently intend to have the time of your life."

"Hope so: if you play up and Malcolm doesn't make himself a nuisance. I'll find decent quarters for you; and there'll always be a bed in my 'digs.' Officially, I shall live with my mother. But I'll hang on to the Albany suite; and when I'm bored stiff with playing the dutiful son, I'll haul you up on a telephone wire and we'll buzz round — unofficially!" Van's left eyelid twitched. "Begin to see daylight now, K?"

"I'm still feeling a bit dazzled," Karl admitted honestly. "You want me, so far as I can, to make the woods and home farms more profitable working concerns?"

"Precisely. My father keeps more acres under corn than most big landlords, these days. Sticks to it on principle, though it doesn't pay as it should; and of course he was badly let down in the eighties and nineties like all the farming world. You talked immensely learned last week about ways and means of getting a bigger yield from the same acreage. And I bet you've picked up a tip or two, ambling round agricultural Germany. We've no end to learn from your country, in that as well as other things."

"Not my country, thanks very much." Karl corrected him in a contained voice, and Van smilingly accepted the rebuke.

"Good old Karl! A shame to rag you. But, nationally, a man takes after his father."

"Well — personally, I take after my mother. It's her I have to thank for the priceless boon of a liberal English education. And I've spent enough of my vacs in Germany to know just how priceless it is."

"Hear, hear!" Van remarked softly. "One's usually led to suppose it's the other way round; that our youngsters are wasting their substance on riotous athletics and husks of dead languages when they ought to be specializing technically for all they're worth."

"That's the swing of the pendulum, and no doubt it'll swing too far. I've had the luck to see something of both sides and I can only say, 'Commend me to the liberally educated muddler.'

Nine-tenths of the technically trained prodigies are working for him, and under him, because they're not fit for anything else. Of course there are shining exceptions everywhere. But, take it all round, Germany is grinding out a race of highly trained clerks and mechanics, mostly engaged in filling the pockets of commercial Jews. England, with all her bungling, is still turning out leaders of men."

Van lifted his eyebrows. "You seem to have had an extra special eye-opener over there this summer. D'you hold forth in that vein to the mighty Schonberg? He's no mere clerk or mechanic."

"No. He's one of the shining exceptions. We get a good many of them over here; and, I admit, they blaze around to some purpose."

"You also admitted the other day — to return to our corn-fields — that they manage to squeeze twice as much out of a hundred acres of poor soil, in a harsh climate, as our fellows do, with soil and climate in their favour. What's the recipe? But you've got it all at your fingers' ends, you walking encyclopædia!"

Karl's conversation for the next fifteen minutes bristled with technicalities enough to justify the epithet and bewilder the brain of his liberally educated friend. He supported his facts with figures: and Van's lazy amusement was tinged with respect. He still constantly found himself astonished at the varied amount of practical knowledge Karl kept up his sleeve, ready for service as required.

When all was said, he remarked genially: "Couldn't follow half of it. But if you'll only play up and work a few of those miracles here, I'd get no end of kudos for discovering such a treasure!"

Karl smiled at that characteristic inducement. "You can't work miracles with the land," he said. "It's a matter of steady plodding in the right direction; and over here the human element's against it. The British farmer's a distrustful beggar — not without good reason. It's not that he's merely ignorant; his whole level of intelligence wants lifting. He also badly

wants the security of State aid and protection, which he isn't likely to get while Free Traders rule the waves."

"But, my dear fellow, we can't burden the country with tariffs simply on his account."

Karl shrugged. It was an old bone of contention. "Then you must accept," he said, "the farmer's lack of enterprise."

"Very well—I accept it! All the same, with a man like you in charge, we might get a move on. Scientific treatment of the soil—fertilizers and things—But the point is—what about my proposal? Are you game?"

Karl looked thoughtful again. Then he said frankly: "You must admit that, so far, it's all a trifle sketchy. Naturally I'd like to feel sure your father's agreeable and that Mr. Malcolm—even if he isn't agreeable—would not be obstructive. As it is, my position's quite undefined."

"I—see," Van said, with a deliberate drawl. "Truth is, you'd sooner boss a smaller place than play second fiddle here. And the fact that I'm keen on the plan doesn't affect your business point of view."

At that Karl fairly lost his temper.

"If you're death on talking such putrid rot, God himself can't prevent you," he retorted, and walked away to the mantelpiece. Then he swung round and looked hard at his friend, who still sat there smoking, apparently unperturbed. "You know you didn't mean that, Van. You know I'm a cautious mover. And if I put my back into a thing, I want to feel I can hang on long enough to reap results. But you say yourself it's all in the air as yet. So I vote we drop it, till your affairs are more settled—and get on with our game. Meantime, I won't accept anything else. That satisfy you?"

"Oh, yes. I'm agreeable," Van answered coolly. "I shan't worry you again. If you want the job you can say so. Now—come on. I owe you a licking; and I shall have particular pleasure in administering it!"

The achievement took time and all Van's skill, for they were well matched. When it was over, he laid an envelope on the table.

"Your fifty," he remarked genially. "A good deal overdue. Thanks very much — and all that."

"Sure you can spare it conveniently? I'm in no hurry."

"That's a mercy, 'coz it's all I can spare conveniently — just at the moment."

Karl pocketed the envelope. "Don't worry about that, old chap," he said. "I'm always glad to be of use."

"With reservations!" Van reminded him feelingly: and they went on into the hall where they found the elders just back from church.

CHAPTER VI

*One sleeps, indeed, and wakes at intervals . . .
And my provision's for life's waking part;
Accordingly, I use heart, head and hand;
All day I build, scheme, study — and make friends.*

BROWNING

ON Monday they had a great day with the partridges; and on Tuesday Karl departed, leaving Van still mystified and a trifle on edge. He spent most of the week lecturing at a big Agricultural College; and on Saturday he travelled North.

He had small love for the great gloomy manufacturing town, in which Adolf Schonberg and John Burlton were leading lights; but he was fond of his father, though there was little intimacy and less understanding between them. Very early and very decidedly he had announced his unwillingness to enter any one of the elder Schonberg's prosperous lines of business; and his own modest ambition had, at first, been treated as a whim unworthy of serious opposition. Then, suddenly, Schonberg had changed his tune; and if the boy wondered a little, he had asked no questions. The fact sufficed.

His own English upbringing — a concession to his mother — had inevitably tended to separate father and son; and devotion to the memory of one dead woman was, by this time, the only strong link between them. For Karl knew very well that his father's second marriage implied no change of heart towards her, who had been the sole romance of his life. It was the duty of all good Germans to propagate the race; and Schonberg needed a woman in the house. That was his common-sense view of the matter; and his occasional remarks on the subject were frank to a point that jarred on Karl's finer susceptibilities, even while he appreciated his father's somewhat peculiar notion of loyalty to the dead.

Because of that loyalty, Karl had been reluctant to suspect the nature of Schonberg's manifold business activities. Outwardly, he seemed as amicable to England as his son; even when he laughed at her failings and extolled the greatness of Germany. But—as Karl grew in years and knowledge—his young suspicions deepened to an innate distrust that had kept him clear of all business connection with his father; and partly accounted for his doubtful attitude towards Van's astonishing offer. Not that he seriously supposed Schonberg had the will or the power to harm Lord Avonleigh; but he was Teuton enough to know that his inordinate appetite for information could not be dismissed as a mere hobby. There was direction behind it, though he could not see whither it tended.

It was true, also, that he had felt himself accepted at Avonleigh simply as Van's friend; and, in the circumstances, he demanded more individual recognition. He knew well enough that, if Malcolm proved obstructive, Van would keep discreetly aloof and leave him to bear the brunt. It was a pity, too, that he was so casual about money. Karl wondered whether Lord Avonleigh realized it, whether it would complicate their business relations.

On his northern journey he had leisure to consider these things, to rate himself for a disloyal son, and finally to decide that, if his father showed any eagerness for him to accept the less responsible post, he would risk Van's passing annoyance and refuse outright.

The Schonbergs and Burltons inhabited large, unbeautiful houses on the outskirts of Randchester; houses with immaculate front windows, and gardens decorously screened by a wall of evergreens from prying eyes. Somewhere beyond the evergreens you would find the inevitable group of lilac, laburnum and crimson may; with a cypress thrown in for dignity or a weeping ash for shade. Schonberg's residence was named 'Freischütz.' Burlton had christened his 'Warton Grange.' Driving from the station, one came first to Warton Grange; and Karl spied Mr. Burlton on the gravel path. Norfolk suit and tweed cap pro-

claimed him on the verge of his week-end flitting. Karl waved his stick, shouted to the driver and sprang out.

"Take my traps on, will you?" he said, "and say I'll be coming along shortly."

He had a real affection for 'old Burlton'; and, on the whole, found his three younger boys and widowed sister more congenial than the step relations at 'Freischütz.' But it puzzled and disappointed him that he could make so little headway with Jack. He knew, from remarks at home, that partnership was in the air; but of underlying causes he had not the remotest idea.

John Burlton came forward with a friendly smile on his commonplace, capable face. He was a thick-set man in the early fifties; externally alert and mobile, internally slow-moving and limited, with as kind a heart and as much genuine honesty as is compatible with success in the 'savage wars of peace.' Like many Englishmen, of his class and age, he was more concerned to keep his figure from spreading than his mind from rusting. He belonged to the type of man — common enough in these islands — who will make a hard and fast statement, listen placidly to a string of shattering arguments, and, at the end, repeat his original remark as if no dissenting word had been uttered. Outside his human affections, the pith of life was summed up for him in two words — Burltons and golf. Five days of the week he devoted to the first; two to the second. And those two days were sacrosanct. Only the trump of doom would interrupt his weekly pursuit of the elusive ball and the sacred rite of keeping himself 'fit.' Had the frivolous ventured to inquire, "Fit for what?" no doubt but he would have answered gravely, "For more golf."

"Just flitting, as you see!" he greeted Karl in his cheery week-end voice. The week-end voice was Jack's invention; but it certainly had an unmistakable ring seldom heard within the four walls of his office. "The car'll be here in a minute. You home for long?"

"Only till Monday. That's why I nipped out. Have the youngsters anything on to-morrow?"

A parlour maid appeared at the front door. "The telephone, please, sir. Mr. Schonberg."

With a muttered expletive, Burlton hurried back to the study; and Karl, waiting in the hall, was divided between sympathy and amusement as he listened to the rapid one-sided soliloquy jerked out by Burlton in tones far removed from those of his greeting.

"Monday — first thing Monday — *what?* But, my dear fellow, it's impossible. I'm just starting. Yes — yes. What? Oh, *I* don't think so." A longish pause. "There's the car coming round — yes — yes, I'll look in. But, confound it all, man, I shall miss my train —!"

The click of the receiver on its hook was followed by the reappearance of Burlton, his week-end aspect clean gone; vexation in his voice, a worried look about his eyes.

"Never *knew* such a fellow as your father for doing things on the nail," he said, with a short laugh. "He wants me round there. Some business he's convinced won't wait. There's no choking him off, and I'm blest if I shan't lose my train. — All right, Robson, stow in the traps on the chance." This to the mystified chauffeur, who had just announced the car.

Then he thrust his head into the drawing-room. "Good-bye, Alice. Business at Schonberg's, so you may see me back, unless I drive the whole way. Damned if I *won't* drive all the way," he added, with decision, when the door was shut. "Shall I give you a lift, Karl?"

As they rolled smoothly along the metalled highway, Burlton repeated, in a more genial tone: "Never *knew* such a fellow as your father. I don't believe he has two ideas in his head outside business. Of course it's half the secret of his success. But in my opinion it's good for a man to shake himself free now and then. Frankly, Karl, in some ways he's one of the most amazing men I've ever met. But I can't have him playing old Harry with my week-ends!"

Freischütz was a few degrees uglier than Warton Grange: but the affinity of type was evident; and the house was still

further disfigured by Mrs. Schonberg's deplorable taste in curtains.

The sound of the car brought Schonberg to the door — a bulky, ill-dressed figure of a man; firm, fleshly, and powerful; the hands notably so with a large thumb which he used to enforce his arguments or his will. And the face matched those forcible hands: prominent eyes under a vigorous forehead, a thick, assertive nose, sensuous mouth and good strong teeth stained with tobacco. His colourless hair and moustache were well brushed upward, and the slight droop of his lids gave him a misleading air of indifference which he found very useful on occasion. But his son — if not his friend — was quite aware that very little escaped the attention of those sleepy-looking eyes, or of the brain behind them, that noted and registered every serviceable item with mechanical precision.

When the car drew up, he smiled genially and waved his hand.

"Karl also! That is goot. Golf-sticks also!" He jerked a derisive thumb towards them. "You still belief you will go?"

"Of course I shall." Burlton answered doggedly. "Come on. Let's get through with the business as soon as possible."

Schonberg lifted his shoulders. "To make way for the greater business — hein? It will be your ruin yet, my friend, this graze for walking — walking — walking after one foolish leetle white ball. Firmly I belief you would prefer losing a big deal to a round of golf!"

But Burlton was in no mood to appreciate a sally at his own expense. "I have yet to learn that the interests of the firm have ever been neglected for my hobby," he replied with a touch of stiffness. "I earn my leisure and I work the better for it."

"Well — well, we will not quarrel over my little choke. Gome, you shall hear if I had reason to upset your plans." He laid a heavy, affectionate hand on Karl's shoulder. "Glad to see you, my boy. We shall talk later. Business first, pleasure after — even if it is weeg-end — hein?"

The two exchanged a smile of amused understanding before Schonberg followed his unwilling guest. For all his inflexi-

bility, the man had a strong human streak in him and strong passions, both kept in a separate compartment from that unwavering, inhuman machine — his business brain.

Nearly an hour passed before Karl heard the study door open, and saw — from the windows of his own smoky sanctum — Burlton's car roll away through the gathering dusk. Then he strolled in to see his father whom he found — as always — in his big swivel chair, a cork pen in his hand, a drooping German pipe between his teeth.

On his expansive desk not a paper was out of place. Every pigeon-hole was neatly packed; and the shelves that rose above them held books of reference and scientific journals dealing with an amazing variety of subjects. In the window, on a heavy polished table stood a castor-oil plant in a rotund pink bowl that clashed violently with its magenta mat. There were faded red velvet curtains, and privacy was secured by a Japanese bamboo blind. Over the mantelpiece hung a water-colour study of Karl's mother — the one relatively beautiful thing in the room. It was a tender, intelligent, wistful face, with eyes that seemed to follow you when you moved. Directly under the picture stood a vase of early chrysanthemums. Winter or summer, that vase held its tribute of flowers from the man who had married again eighteen months after her death.

A folding leather screen held the four younger Schonbergs; but the good Anna, who had contributed these human legacies to the Fatherland, was nowhere in evidence. Karl often wondered whether the omission hurt her feelings, or whether she even noticed it? If she did, she gave no sign.

The whole room, though shabby and unlovely, had an air of homely comfort; but it was stuffy to the point of suffocation and it reeked of strong tobacco.

Schonberg greeted his son with a guttural "Aha!" removed his spectacles and indicated a deep leather chair near the fire. In that chair, facing the window, sat all his visitors. He himself, when he turned his swivel seat to confront them, had his back to the light. It is a common trick of diplomats. and it had often served him well.

"Sure I'm not interrupting?" Karl asked as he sat down; and Schonberg's wide smile revealed all his teeth.

"Sush an interruption I could more often put up with! But we cannot offer you, here, the attractions of Afonleigh Hall."

"That's an unfair hit!" Karl retorted, and shied away from the subject. "Is Burlton really going to drive out to Warton this evening?"

Schonberg shrugged. "I imachine not. Poor defil! He must sleep Friday night in his ownbett. He shall miss one round after his leetle white ball; so he has no thanks for me, though to-day I haf done him a goot turn, worth to miss three weeg-ends for. Ach, these English! In all the years I haf known them, never haf I come to understand their madness of a ball —"

"It's a very healthy sort of madness."

Schonberg regarded him thoughtfully; then he looked up at the face of his dead wife. "You are nearly so bad. Not quite. Because of her wish, I haf made you almost one of them. But — *Gott sei dank!* You haf more sense —"

"I'm not so sure! I didn't find any lack of brains at Oxford —"

"Cht-cht!" Oxford was dismissed with a gesture. "Brains are of one kind. Sense is of another. I am still so often astonished — as to-night — *how* they are fools!" Suddenly he raised his heavy lids, revealing the pale iris' full circle and changing in a flash the whole aspect of his face. "Ach zo, the goot Gott knows his business. Wise and foolish created he them — so the wise should profit by the arrangement!"

"D'you mean — take advantage?" Karl asked quietly, and something in his tone checked the older man's unusual burst of frankness. His face resumed its look of sleepy geniality.

"More often lose than take, my boy," he answered lightly. "But you are here to tell me news — of your lectures and your fine friends. You had a goot time — hein?"

"Ripping time. I always do. I'm going there later for the pheasants." He paused; then added casually: "They've just

had a bomb-shell sprung on them. Lord Avonleigh's going to India next month, as Governor of Bombay —”

Again that sudden, odd lift of the lids. “A-ach! They send him to India? No fool—he. A strong man. But what will come to Afonleigh? Your dear friend is too mush man-about-town to lif there. They will shut it up? Perhaps let —”

“I haven't an idea. Van has his work at the Foreign Office. But he's keen about the place, too. He actually suggested putting me in charge of the woods and home farms to make them more profitable working concerns.”

“You?” Schonberg drew in his lips precisely as Karl had done when Van broached the idea. Then he sat silent, puffing at his pipe and regarding his son with sleepy, inscrutable eyes. “And you accepted — hein?”

“Oh, no,” Karl answered lightly. “It was just a suggestion, because he knows I've studied things pretty thoroughly.”

“You can thank Cherman blood for that. Begoz of it, we become always more indispensable to lazier peoples. How are you inclined yourself?”

“I'm thinking things over. Of course I'd like Avonleigh. But I want to know just what my position would be —”

“To tague all trouble off his shoulders and win credit for him in his father's eyes!” Schonberg answered with a guttural chuckle. “That is the fashion of these young lordlings. I know them! But Afonleigh is a fine estate. It is pozzible you would haf a pretty free hand. And afterwards — who can tell?”

Karl shook his head. “I don't flatter myself I'm likely to step into Mr. Malcolm's shoes. I gather he's not easy to work with. And of course in Norfolk I should practically run the show.”

“That is the tempting bait! Nashural enough!” And Schonberg fell into a thoughtful silence staring at the fire.

Karl, surreptitiously scanning his face, was pricked with sharp curiosity. If one could but lift the curtain and read the writing on the brain! Nothing his father had said showed the slightest bias one way or the other: yet — for no definable

reason — Karl felt more uncertain of him than ever. He had looked for a sign, and the very fact that he had found none reawakened suspicion. He knew his father for a man of definite opinions — often aggressively so. Yet he had refrained even from proffering a word of advice.

"Why on earth —?" mused bewildered Karl; and his bewilderment was tinged with annoyance. He had imbibed at school and college a love of straight dealing; and in his father's presence he was constantly worried by the sense of hidden currents that effectively killed all frank, natural intercourse. So he sat silent waiting for Schonberg's next remark.

"Hanged if I'll give him a lead," he thought, with a touch of boyish obstinacy. "Even if I have to stick it out for half an hour."

Happily he was not so severely taxed. He got off with seven minutes by the black marble clock. Then Schonberg removed his pipe and shifted his eyes to his son's face. They had no softness in them except when they rested on Karl — his Freda's legacy.

"Well, well, you shall think it over," he said. "It is your affair. I would bet ten pounds the scales are tilted towards Afonleigh and your friend Fan!"

"I wouldn't be surprised!" Karl answered with a non-committal smile and heaved himself out of the deep chair — a little of the study atmosphere went a long way.

"Nor I! Only remember — if it is Viscount Afonleigh or Sir Thomas Wade, you haf first-glass qualifications and your services are worth goot money. Now I haf letters to finish. Sush a pile! No slack time for me — if it is weeg-end! Perhaps goot lug for Burlton *I* do not run after balls or make a dust all over the country egsercising my car!"

"Is the partnership coming off, then?"

"That is for Burlton to say. I haf made myself useful. It is the duty of all goot Chermans abroad. If indispensable — zo much the better —"

"You're still a good German abroad — yet you choose to live here as a naturalized subject?"

Schonberg adjusted his spectacles and vouchsafed his son a benign smile. "It is precisely abroad that goot Chermans haf the most important werg to do — for the benefit of both gountries, my son!" And with that cryptic remark Karl had to rest content, though the word did not accurately describe his state of mind.

Ten days later came a letter from Van.

MY DEAR OLD CHAP,—

I have braved the elements on your behalf and write to let you know that the coast is clear. I said I wouldn't make the next move. But man is the victim of his virtues, and my natural magnanimity has carried the day. So — if you are agreeable, roll along our way on Friday. Birds are plentiful, and you can see for yourself if my father is agreeable enough to satisfy your modesty and proper pride and all that. As regards my own feelings, you know as much as you deserve to know. So tumble along and don't be a ruddy fool — and you won't regret it!

Yours — within reasonable limits,

V. B.

Karl, having made up his mind, re-read that characteristic effusion with a pensive smile. "That about settles it," he said.

Later on, when he and his father were alone, he decided to announce matters without preamble. "See if I can make him jump!" was his filial thought. But cleverer men than Karl had tried the same experiment without success.

He guilefully chose a moment when his father seemed lost in reflection to remark abruptly: "I've accepted Avonleigh. You were right about the scales!"

Schonberg, who was fingering two walnut shells, did not even look up from his plate.

"Zo!" he gurgled in subterranean depths; and regarded his son with an enigmatical smile. "Goot business for your friend Fan! But you neffer really had two minds about it."

The last was so unexpected that it turned the tables on Karl.

"I don't believe I ever had," he admitted; and directly challenged his father's gaze. It was like looking at two bluish discs

of ground glass, half veiled by the drooping lids. Karl felt suddenly annoyed. He believed half of it was put on for effect. Behind those inscrutable eyes his father was as soft-hearted and sentimental as himself.

"I'm going down there on Friday," he said, to break the queer feeling of tension that grew with the silence.

"To take over charge?"

"No — to shoot pheasants! And I suppose there will be an interview with my formidable host!"

He grimaced at the prospect and Schonberg wagged his sagacious head with elephantine playfulness. "No need to fear him. He is doing goot business. You can bet, he knows it."

Rising, he strolled over to the hearth-rug; and Karl, turning in his chair to face the fire, found his father looking down at him with eyes that were no longer like discs of ground glass.

"You are a damn goot 'boy, Karl," he said in a voice of real feeling. It was a discovery he made periodically, in a tone of virginal conviction; and Karl was prepared for the descent of a heavy hand on his shoulder. "If I gave up my own wishes because of your mother you have neffer caused me to regret it. Only stick on at Afonleigh, and you will replace Mr. Malcolm yet. I shall come down to visit you when I am able. And if Mr. Blount shall wish to let, it is pozzible I can help —"

Karl looked up quickly. "You seem keen on his letting. Have you got a bloated tenant up your sleeve?"

"In the world of finance it is not hard to find bloated tenants for sush a place as that," he answered, removing his hand and speaking in his normal voice.

"I don't fancy Lord Avonleigh would care about it."

"Nor I. But his son is otherwise. We shall see!" And quite suddenly Karl wished he had risked offending Van and kept clear of the whole thing . . .

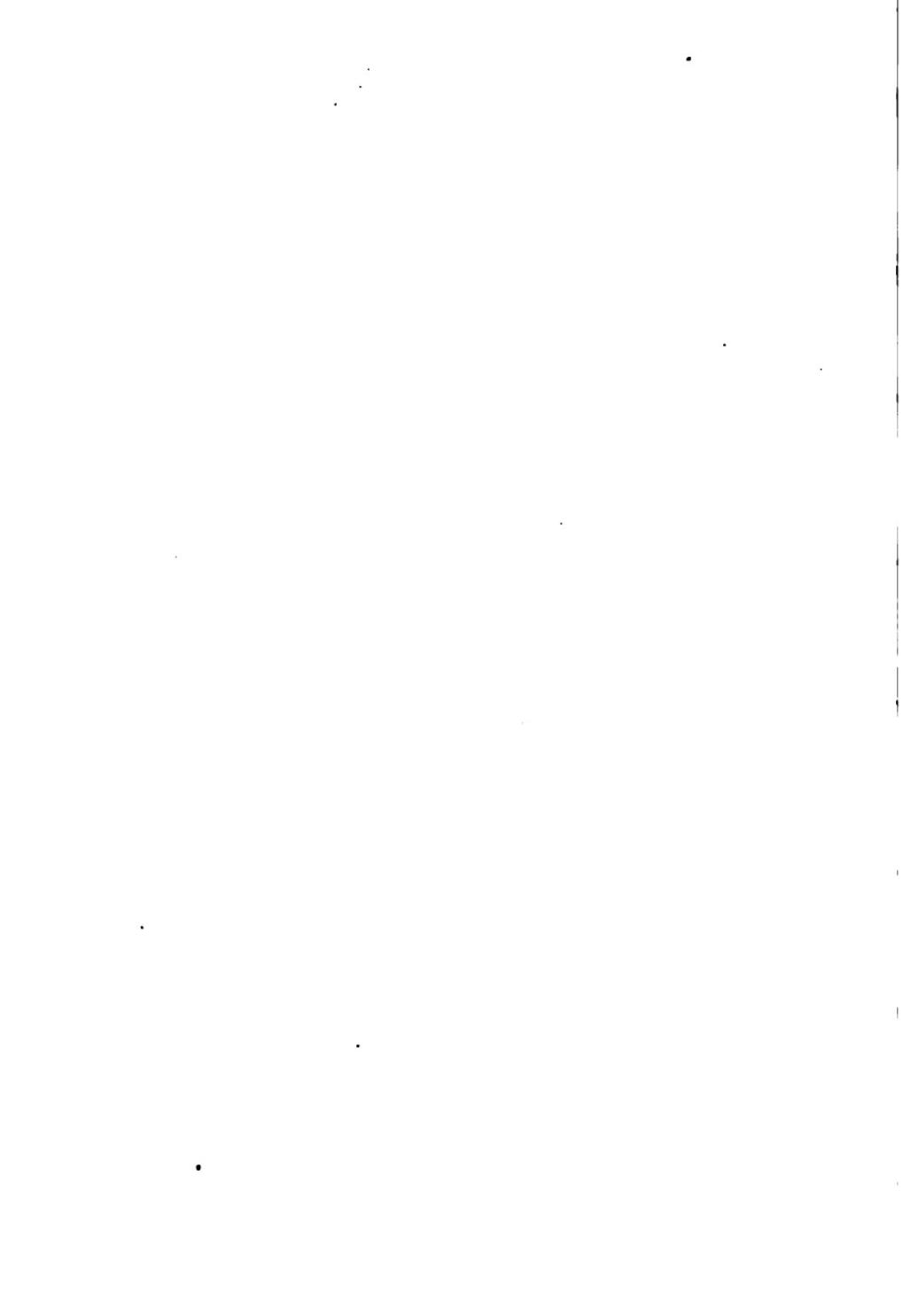
Towards the end of October Lord Avonleigh and Derek left England with no premonition that they had actually seen the last of their prosperous, peaceful, dangerously casual coun-

try, as they had known and loved her all the years of their life. And Lord Avonleigh, stately and comfortably conveyed on a vast P. & O. Liner, had no inkling that his son was lodged in the hold of a tramp steamer, with three hundred men of all grades and types jammed together like herrings in a barrel. In this drastic fashion Derek had taken the plunge; and in this fashion he set out — resolute rather than hopeful — upon the six weeks' voyage to the other end of the world.

END OF BOOK II



BOOK III
INTO THE DEEP



BOOK III INTO THE DEEP

CHAPTER I

*Here is the land, shaggy with wood,
With its old valley, mound and flood,
They called me 'theirs,' who so controlled me.
How am I theirs, if they cannot hold me?
But I hold them.*

EMERSON

- "SHE'LL topple the wrong way, man. She won't fall true."
"She *will* — damn you!"
"She won't, the way you've notched her."
"She's notched true and she'll fall true. You keep your blank mouth shut and mind your own business."
"It's the whole camp's business if a tree that size topples the wrong way."

The two men stood beside the trunk of a mighty Douglas fir that lifted its head a clear hundred and twenty feet into the blue — a peer even among its compeers that thronged the belt of forest behind them. Before them the main clearing of Number One Camp was splashed with noonday sun and shadow resonant with the clank of chain cables, the shriek of donkey engines and the noise of labouring men. Lumberjacks swarmed like ants over the bodies of fallen giants that only yesterday had stood as proudly erect as the living fir now marked for death. It was the accuracy of that notch that would enable the sawyers to 'throw' their tree: and it was Derek Blunt, in coarse shirt and copper-riveted dungarees, who stood there arguing the point. His lean brown face was no longer the face of a boy. The bone formations stood out more strongly. His skin was tanned by eighteen months of exposure to sun and

wind on the plains of Australia and in the lumber camps of British Columbia. His unbuttoned shirt revealed the lighter tint of his chest, and his weather-beaten felt hat was tilted at a rakish angle. Caulked boots and a seven-foot saw completed the equipment of his trade. In that rough gear he looked every inch a woodsman. Health and confidence radiated from him; the unassuming confidence of a man who, by sheer energy and zeal, has attained to a certain mastery of his craft.

It was precisely that note of assurance which had annoyed Hal Symes, the 'under-cutter,' who stood scowling down at him from a steel-shod spring-board fixed into the bark of the tree. He was a loosely made man, with bleached fair hair, pale eyes, and a mathematician's brow that seemed oddly unrelated to the rest of his face. The trail of the waster, the easy-going sensualist, was over it all, from the heavy lids to the slack mouth and chin. Yet there were unmistakable marks of breeding about his ungloved hands, and in the English cadence of his voice. Years ago, in another life, Harold Symmonds had been a well-known figure in the little world of Cambridge. Mathematical dons had expected great things of him. The force latent in his forehead and the weakness latent elsewhere had contended for his soul. And the weaker elements had prevailed —

By this time he was a deplorably well-known figure in the casual logging world of British Columbia. His well-developed muscles ensured him a fair sufficiency of dollars. The dollars ensured him a sufficiency of drinks and women; and presumably it sufficed.

Something of all this Derek had gathered from him at odd times, when whiskey unloosed his tongue, or jealousy prompted an attitude of 'I'm-as-good-as-you-are, anyway!' towards the younger man, whose descent into the lumber world had no apparent connection with women, who drank moderately, was respected by the boys, and patently favoured by 'Maggots,' the camp boss. There was also Mrs. 'Maggots' and pretty Lois Aymes down at Beulah Ranch —

Dislike, bred of jealousy, lurked behind the scowl with which

Symes leaned over and once more tested his notch, placing his double axe in it and looking along the handle, as the 'fallers' came swinging up with their flexible long blade.

Picked men, these, earning anything from eight to ten dollars a day. One was a big blond Swede; the other a typical Canadian, straight-run, clean-cut, his honesty tempered with shrewdness if a business deal were in the wind.

"My! But she's a beauty!" he remarked, eyeing his victim with critical appreciation; and proceeded to cut a wedge for his spring-board four feet above the ground. The Swede followed suit; and mounted on these, the men set to in earnest, working towards the notch; the slim planks springing in unison with the rhythmic motion of their arms.

Swiftly, remorselessly, that strip of steel ate its way into the heart of the tree, while Derek stood watching; hoping he was mistaken about the notch . . .

Standing well away from the majestic creature — so immense, so defenceless against two pairs of skilled hands — he looked steadily upward. A small breeze tossed the higher branches, and on one of them sat a chipmunk — a fair squirrel — nibbling a cone. When the singing note of the saw changed its tone, the men paused; and the Canadian squirted oil along the blade. Then to it again, till the moment came to 'wedge her' lest the weight of the trunk damage the delicate, remorseless, instrument of death.

Gradually the tasselled head leaned sideways. From the depths a hundred feet below came the first suspicion of a crack and a warning shout from the sawyers: "She's moving! — Timber!"

The chipmunk, still nibbling, paid no heed.

Another crack: a report like a small cannon. Then the anguished sound of a mighty rending, of boughs wrenched from living trees, as their stricken fellow crashed through them, with ever increasing speed . . .

And suddenly the whole clearing was alive with shouts and cries —

Derek had not been mistaken. She was falling the wrong way —

Lumberjacks and Chinamen scurried out of the danger zone; the sawyers sprang backwards, swearing lustily; and the shriek of escaping steam was mingled with the scream of shattered branches, as the fir came smashing to earth with a thud that seemed to shake the very hills.

Nothing more considerable than a shack lay in the line of its fall; and that shack was flattened like a house of cards. One out-flung branch damaged a donkey engine; another stunned a Chinaman; a third caught the Canadian sawyer and broke his left arm.

"Where's the blank-blank skunk that notched her?" he demanded fiercely of no one in particular. But Symes was not to be seen.

"Made tracks while his shoes was good!" opined Mick, the sawyer's brother, who was rendering first aid. "Gee-whiz! If I'd 'a' caught him!"

Meantime the camp had recovered itself; and the men were at work on their trophy — 'limbers' lopping off the branches, 'buckers' sawing the trunk, with 'snipers' on their heels to round off jagged ends.

Derek was among the 'buckers,' plying his saw that no longer engaged in gymnastics on its own account, as in the early days of their acquaintance. It was hot work and hard work, and it satisfied certain primitive instincts that are scotched, but rarely killed, by the insidious process of civilization.

At last that which had once been a majestic Douglas fir lay stripped in the sunlight; reduced to mere logs ready for the powerful machinery of hooks and steel cable to work their will.

At a signal from the hook tender, the 'donkey' whistled, and the cable it controlled moved on, dragging the main log, with insolent ease, through a wilderness of fern and scrub, ploughing deep furrows and landing its prisoner — bruised and battered — on the loaded trolley. An answering whistle heralded the appearance of a small railway engine; and the long black line of freight slid down the grade bound for a lower reach of the mountain river that would float its logs to the sawmills of Abe Callander in Red Cedar Valley.

As the last truck vanished, the cook-house gong caused a general stampede of that mixed rough and tumble of human fragments — strapping Canadians and Swedes, wiry Americans and Italians, English, Irish, and Scotch. There were men of education, men of character, and men devoid of both. But the bulk were of true lumberjack breed — simple and kindly as children when sober, mere animals when they were drunk.

The cook-house, where they congregated, had a homelike air, with its laden bench-flanked tables and glowing stove at the far end; its piles of chopped wood breast high along the walls; shelves stacked with bright-coloured canned stuffs and slabs of bacon hanging from the roof.

Derek seated himself between a hard-bitten Cockney and Dan Sayers, the 'winged' Canadian, who still desired the blood of Symes.

"The gopher darsn't show his face in here," the injured giant remarked with drawling emphasis. "Fear he'd get a fit of indigestion through swallowin' half his teeth. If the boss don't fire him good *an'* quick this time, I'll say the word meself — *an'* quit. He'd oughter bin fired months ago. But he's got the soft side of the missus: *an'* 'Maggots' ain't boss in his own shack. Lend a fork, Derry, while I chop this stuff."

Derek lent a fork and briefly expressed his sympathy: then he fell to upon his own share with a will. He had learnt, by now, to bolt his dinner with the best of them and to waste no time in talk by the way.

When the stoking process was over, he filled a pipe and strolled off through a belt of forest to a lesser clearing, where the wide valley and towering peaks beyond came suddenly into view. Here two log cabins, partly scooped out of the hillside, represented Bill Margett's office and private shack, where his wife and seven-year-old son spent some two months every summer — entirely for his benefit.

As a matter of fact, he held that a woman was quite out of place in a logging camp; but Mrs. Margett's wifely devotion was not to be denied. Indeed, the good fellow had never yet found it in his heart to deny her anything.

She was a townswoman by birth and temperament and she hailed from the Old Country. She frankly favoured Symes, the degraded gentleman; and had also shown signs of favouring Derek, which annoyed him considerably, and, on occasion, provoked the shameless Symes to open jealousy. Matters were further complicated by the fact that Derek respected Margett and was adored by his small son; while he heartily disliked the woman, whose chief pleasure in life seemed unconnected with either. But Mrs. Margett was masterful and insensitive, and knew very well how to play on the passions of men. It was her chief talent and she was not the woman to let it rust unused. To-day she had bidden him come and receive a list of commissions he was to carry out at Nealston; as he had a few days' leave of absence, to do business for 'Maggots,' in that flourishing lake-side town.

Derek himself had no shadow of doubt where that gentleman had sought shelter from the wrath of the camp: and there he found him, thoroughly at ease, smoking and sipping lime cordial, in 'Maggots's' raw-hide armchair; Mrs. Margett, also sipping and smoking, at his elbow.

As she rose to greet Derek, he hated himself for noticing that the two chairs were suspiciously close together. She was a woman of good carriage and seductive curves, who would presently be stout; of the type favoured in second-rate melodrama. Her red blouse effectively illuminated her; and the hide armchairs were stacked with red cushions that arrived with her and vanished when she left the camp.

"At last!" she said with a clinging pressure of Derek's hand. "I thought, like as not, you'd forgotten everything but your fling in town and your Sunday on Beulah Ranch!"

"No fear I'd forget," Derek answered in his most matter-of-fact voice, ignoring the playful thrust. "Have you got the list ready?"

"Well — thereabouts. What's the almighty hurry? Sit right down and have a smoke."

Derek glanced at Symes, who was aimlessly turning the pages of a magazine.

"Thanks. I think I won't," he said politely. "It'll take all my time to get down to Macrae's before sunset —"

"And — you'd sooner miss an hour here than an hour there —?" She challenged him, with a look so boldly significant that it drew the blood to his face; and at sight of it she laughed softly. "Poor old boy! Is it as bad as all that? Queer the way you men go down like ninepins before a clinging chit of a girl with hair that colour. But the lucky devil who gets her will find it a danger signal —"

"Honour bright, I don't know what you're driving at," Derek broke in desperately. "The Macraes have been mighty good to me, and I don't want to put them out by turning up late. That's all there is to it. As for Miss Aymes and the colour of her hair, it's no concern of mine."

At this point Symes, who had recovered his composure, was moved to reassert himself.

"Miss Aymes!" he mimicked with a throaty chuckle. "Ain't we the pink of propriety! I thought she mostly went by the name of Lois among her pals."

Derek, without looking round, put out a hand for his instructions.

"If you'll give me that list I'll be going on now," he said, frankly ignoring her hint that it was incomplete.

With an odd smile she took the slip of paper from her davenport — the only piece of genuine furniture in the room.

"There's just a thing or two wants explaining, if your patience can stick it five minutes longer!" she said. Then, half seating herself on a corner of the table, she leaned so close to him that her arm pressed against his shoulder, and proceeded to harass him with a string of details, flashing a glance at him, between whiles, from under her lids. Detesting her, yet uncomfortably aware of her, he was thankful when the ordeal ended: so, in his own fashion, was Symes.

Derek, free at last, glanced at him; hesitated a moment; — then the instinct of the gentleman prevailed. "Anything I can do for you," he asked, "in a small way?"

Symes stared hard at him and said slowly: "We-ell, you can

give my love to 'the girls' up Vere Street. And give Miss Lois an extra kiss or two on my account — if she hasn't quite forgotten yours truly. She takes to kisses, that girl, like a duck to water."

It did not occur to Derek that the man was paying Mrs. Margett back in kind: and his straight look had a gleam in it that recalled his father.

"You can do your own commissions in that line — no man better," he said with quiet scorn. "S'long Mrs. Margett. Tell the boss I'll be back on time."

And so he made good his escape without a repetition of her intimate handclasp — the sole satisfaction he gleaned from that unpleasant quarter of an hour.

On the threshold young Bill charged into him — an excitable slip of a boy with his father's clear Canadian eyes.

"Say, Derry, what you running away for?"

"Business, old chap. I'm off down to the Lake."

"Take me with you — *do*."

"Not this time. Some day — perhaps, if your dad would trust me."

"Course he would; you ask him."

They were free of the shack now, crossing the open; Bill trotting beside Derek, clutching his hand. Children were never shy with him nor he with them. He rarely caressed them or played the fool with them: but there were hidden currents of understanding that made their companionship an effortless joy. Some quality in them, which it never occurred to him to analyze, stirred the unplumbed depths of his manhood: and it was partly because Lois Aymes seemed to him, still, more child than woman, that the desire had flamed in him to flatten the face of Hal Synes for linking her, by indirect implication, with the girls up Vere Street.

Bill's company, after a quarter of an hour with those two, was like a draught of spring water after a glass of cheap liqueur.

When they reached the belt of trees through which he had come, Derek stopped and bade the boy run back again.

"Say! You *will* ask my dad? Wish-you-may-die if you don't!"

"Wish-I-may-die if I don't!" Derek assured him gravely. "And I'll bring you a surprise parcel on Tuesday. But don't you lie awake guessing!"

The boy gave his hand a convulsive squeeze. "My! Derry, I *do* love you. I'll be never so good till Tuesday." By way of guarantee he scampered across the clearing, turned and fluttered a hand, then vanished round the corner of the hut.

Derek, eager to be off, went straight to the 'bunk-house,' a long wooden building with 'beds' for forty men. These were made on the ground, and covered with straw; slender logs dividing each from each. At the head end of Derek's bunk lay a canvas bag, his only item of luggage. It contained spare underclothing, a few books and home photographs, two pairs of flannels, and the beloved, identical Norfolk coat in which he had tramped through the Tyrol two summers ago.

Swiftly he exchanged his logging kit for his own garments; but he stuck to the faded felt hat with the upturned brim. He was fond of it and possessed no other. Then he went off to saddle his cayuse, a graceful sorrel, with irregular white patches on his flanks and over one eye. He was a nervous, excitable creature, liable to buck in elated moods, and what he didn't know about trails wasn't worth knowing. Derek had christened him 'Kitts' in memory of his own old friend at home. He loved him dearly, and a close intimacy had been established between them. Even in his wickedest moods Derek could gentle him back to good behaviour; and to-day he was in high fettle. Saddling and mounting him was a lively proceeding; then, with a final flirt of his heels, he crossed the open in a series of bounds, and settled down to an easy canter as they passed out of the strong sunlight into the shadowy green silences of the forest.

CHAPTER II

*To lose myself
Among the common creatures of the world;
To draw some gain from having been a man;
Neither to hope, nor fear, — to live, at length!*

BROWNING

DEREK had a long ride ahead of him, through endless aisles of virgin forest, to the point at which a little mountain railway linked the mining camp at Windyridge, with the service of steamers on the Lake; but for him the journey itself was one of the chief virtues of his holiday. The immensity of these mountain forests, their 'shadowed leagues of slumbering sound,' laid a spell upon him; and a few hours of unbroken solitude refreshed his spirit like manna from Heaven. He was not yet inured to the common trials of working and eating and sleeping in a herd: and in Abe Callander's outfit there was the usual sprinkling of rough characters. Taken all round, the 'boys' were thorough good fellows within their limits; and if whiskey was their bane, they were singularly free from the meaner vices of town-bred men. Among the better sort Derek had made a few staunch friends: but it was friendship without intimacy; and the real hidden Derek still remained incurably alone.

For the most part, he lived too vigorously to be aware of it, except when the mood was on him; and to-day it was on him acutely, intensified by the little scene in the shack. He had been looking forward quite simply and naturally to his Sunday at Beulah Ranch — the children, the blunt kindness of Mrs. Macrae, Lois Aymes, and her pretty caressing ways. And those two, with their tainted minds, had besmeared everything.

But very soon the brooding silence of the forest closed over him like folded wings; and he surrendered himself to the spell.

It was the brief, perfect moment of early summer when the

snow-slides and the slush are over and the tyranny of black fly and mosquitoes is not yet. New life was quickening under the darkest sods, stirring in every leaf and blade. The very pines and cedars seemed to be secretly awake and aware. Small unseen things rustled in the undergrowth. Chipmunks flitted through the branches overhead. Their ceaseless chirruping flickered, like a light, over unplumbed depths. But never a note of bird music, though one rode on, world without end. And to Derek's English mind, a wood without song-birds seemed an anomaly as strange and sad as a night without stars.

At this hour, in all the woods of Avonleigh, in every coppice and shrubbery, the birds of Home were singing their hearts out for joy that they were made. And Derek's heart hungered to hear them; to see the gleam of young leaves on his beloved beeches, the blaze of daffodils against the grey old house; to sniff the faint clean scent of wallflowers and newmown grass. On the whole he succeeded in locking the door against memory. But to-day the unsleeping thing caught him unawares; and there surged through him such a wave of Home longing as he had not experienced since his first weeks in camp.

Though the splendours and sublimities of Canada dazzled his eyes and exalted his spirit, they were as dust in the balance beside that far-off insignificant island that was Home. Here was no sense of intimacy, no mist-blurred horizons. Here the heavens seemed higher, the depths deeper, the very mountains, in their magnificence, a shade too dominant, too sharply defined.

And the face of the land was mirrored in the soul of its people. Even while he delighted in their simplicity, shrewdness, and untiring vigour, he found their characters, like their scenery, lacking in atmosphere. Bone of England's bone and flesh of her flesh, they were yet so distinctly un-English that looking into their minds gave him sometimes an odd sense of seeing his own reversed, like handwriting in a mirror. Their very love of country was a case in point. Derek, like most Englishmen, loved England for what she was. His Canadian friends, he found, loved Canada for what they themselves were making of

her every day of their lives. On his side, the attitude of a son to a mother; on theirs, rather that of a mother watching and shaping the growth of her son. And again, he had discovered that his deep-seated love of Nature must be concealed like a vice if he wished to retain the respect of these human dynamos, who saw nothing to marvel at in the ghostly sheen of moonlight on leagues of snow-covered pines or the most arresting conjunction of mountain, forest, and lake. They seemed about as aware of it all as a Londoner is aware of his own familiar glories. Their eyes beheld the visible garment of God, but their minds were intent on the absorbing business of remodelling it to fit the needs of man. To 'fuss round' after scenery was the mark of the tripper, the tenderfoot, the weak-kneed sentimentalist. The true son of Canada demanded naked realities, with an insistence that tempted Derek, at times, to fling down the challenge: "What, after all, *are* the realities? The everlasting hills or your mushroom mining camp, that to-day is and to-morrow is scorched into ashes by the breath of a forest fire?"

But so far he had bridled his tongue; and his comrades respected him accordingly.

To-day, with sights and sounds of England tugging at his heart, he felt suddenly, acutely out of tune with it all; suddenly, acutely homesick for the leisured, casual spirit of England, for her low hills and blue distances; for Van's chaff and a talk with his father and a sight of his mother's face; for clean linen and a good dinner and all the minor comforts of home that he had valued so little when they were a matter of course —

The real trouble, when these moods assailed him, was the knowledge that he had only to wire to his father, and in a few weeks he could be with him, seeing a new country, talking to cultivated men and women, enjoying the lawful pleasures that were his by right of birth. The way was open. No hindrance, save his own obstinate resolve to go through with it, even against odds.

And — on the whole — he had kept his own counsel. To his people he had vouchsafed little beyond reassuring generalities. Mark and Jack had been favoured with fuller information; but, even so, the half was not told them. About the greater part of

that nightmare voyage in the hold they had heard nothing, nor ever would.

In all his sheltered days, he had not dreamed what misery, and worse, a man of gentle birth and clean instincts could endure simply from incessant physical contact with a mixed crowd of his own kind: and the crowd packed into the hold of that tramp steamer had been largely recruited from the scum of great cities. There were scores, also, of half-educated malcontents, with the virus of class hatred in their veins; and to these his mere gentlemanhood had been his worst offence. His refinement of speech, his natural reserves, his willingness to help and serve — the hall-mark of the aristocrat — had all been so many targets for their unreasoning animosity and scorn. It was the kind of thing he would have refused to believe from another man's lips; and three weeks of it had brought him near the end of his tether.

He remembered, with shame, a becalmed evening in the Indian Ocean; a three-quarter moon beginning to take colour; a flaming afterglow in the west that turned the waters to wine; and, in the stern, among coils of rope, a lonely, disillusioned Derek, so bitterly at odds with everything that, when the time came to leave the vastness and the silence and the clean breath of the sea for the foul atmosphere of the hold he had felt like slipping overboard simply to get away from it all and taking his chance of a rescue before his strength gave out.

It was a mere desperate impulse, gone in a flash; but it pulled him up with a round turn; and it marked a point from which matters began to improve.

There are good men in every crowd; and several of these he had discovered, when he settled into his stride; — men whose range of reading surprised him; who could think and express their thoughts more forcibly than the average product of polite education. From these he had learned much about his own country and his own class, that enabled him to see both from a fresh angle of vision; and with one of them he had struck up a rough-and-ready friendship that considerably enlivened the first dreary spell of job-hunting ashore.

Dan Maguire was as Irish as his name; a born adventurer, of unquenchable spirit, who at one moment would confound Derek for the fool he was to have been born an Englishman, and the next — with true Emerald logic — belaud him for the very qualities he derived from that prenatal error. But for Maguire, those first days in Adelaide — chiefly spent in discovering the fraudulence of agents and their own entire superfluity — would have been a hopelessly grey and sordid memory. As it was, they had contrived to strike flashes of humour out of the very stones Fate offered them for bread; and Maguire, with '*Sursum Caudas!*' for his war cry, was unquenchable.

"Let's be removing our patronage from this Queen of Cities," said he, when Adelaide had metaphorically spurned them for the space of a week, "and give the bally farmers a chance."

The move up-country brought a change in their run of luck. It was high summer; the farmers welcomed extra help; and for the next three months Derek had his first taste of real manual labour; carting, loading, and doing odd jobs about the farm.

Though his breeding went for nothing in this, the most democratic of all British Dominions, the qualities arising from it went for a good deal. A British 'tenderfoot,' who seemed to recognize that he had everything to learn, was a sufficiently rare bird to impress even an Australian farmer: and about this time, a thought had come to him that gave a new significance to his round of drudgery. If he could glean a little practical knowledge of up-to-date farming, his father might be induced to put him in charge of Trevanyon; and he would like nothing better on earth. Independence, personal responsibility and freedom from routine were, for him, the ideal elements in work and life: and the mere chance of achieving them was worth a passing sacrifice of all three. So — tired but resolute — he had bowed his back to weeks of monotonous and uncongenial toil —

Not so Maguire — a rolling stone by taste and temperament.

Early in the New Year, he grew restless, and proceeded to unsettle Derek with alluring second-hand tales of bush-life and the gold-fields out West. Derek, though sceptical, was eager enough for fresh experiences, for the dangers and uncertainties

that test a man's resources and his wits. In vain did the farmer confound the Irishman for a liar and the Englishman for a fool. A rise in wages had no magnetic attraction for men in the hopeful twenties bitten with the lure of the unknown —

So they set their faces westward; and in a raw little mining town they encountered a friendly sandalwood cutter, whose gilded yarns lured them into joining him for a spell. Their needs were not formidable — an axe, a sleeping-blanket, and a gun; stores and belongings piled on a handcart, which they must draw between them. With these they set out to work their way through the bush to a certain gold claim, where — according to their new friend, Foxy Lee — a man could pick up a fortune as 'easy as winkin'.'

Meantime there was the bush; a vast tableland of red granite and stunted blue-leaved mulgas; each one so like its fellow that if a man lost his bearings he was helpless; in local phrase, 'bushed.'

Through this eerie, inviolate region — that had neither the bloom of youth nor the maturity of age — they tramped unhurriedly, cutting sandalwood by day, bivouacking at night under stars that flashed like cut steel. It was a solitary trade. Each man went off alone, with his axe and gun, to scour a certain area, cutting all he could find and dragging it to a central pile for collecting later on.

Except near water-holes, there was little sign of life. The natives were practically extinct. Birds were few and strange, with no music in them to enliven the ghostly silence. It was like a land under a spell — timeless, soundless, changeless. The very bushes, in their isolated stillness, seemed listening for some whisper of release from the wide, indifferent sky.

The strong, subtle charm of the place struck some secret chord in Derek's soul. Never before had he so inly felt the intrinsic majesty of stillness; yet always, behind the majesty and the charm, he was aware of a nameless fear: the fear that lurks in all desert lands; that shatters the comfortable faith of the churches and either drives men mad or opens their eyes — and behold, they see.

There were bad days when he went about his work haunted by a horrid undersense of Something waiting to spring out of ambush and annihilate him. In the evenings, when they talked and smoked and cooked their simple meal, it would vanish outright, only to reappear next morning. He had said no word to the others; and in time he discovered, with exquisite relief, that it had evaporated like an evil miasma. But the eerie charm remained. The spiritual struggle had been very real, and with mastery came a curious sense of exaltation; a sense of having, indeed, overridden all boundaries and escaped out of the world into some luminous Beyond, where time and space and human limitations were not —

With Maguire it was very much otherwise. He clamoured for the noise and movement, and conviviality of herded men: and at long last there came a change over the unchanging scene. The monotone of red granite was broken by dykes of schist and ironstone. Trees and grass reappeared. Clouds rolled up out of the south and rain fell. They were back in the normal world again: and before very long they despaired, afar off, a vision of tents and blazing wood fires — Bronker's Claim, at last!

That night they supped and slept in camp. There was singing and laughter and lurid profanity that brought Derek to earth with a crash. And so an end of the strangest spiritual adventure that had befallen him during his brief Odyssey in search of truth.

In the unearthly stillness of the desert he had caught a glimpse of God's reality; in the clamour of life and work on Bronker's Claim he had more than a glimpse of man's reality, with never a film of varnish to gloss its uglier aspects. Two shafts, with parallel galleries yielding five ounces to the ton, were in full swing: and Derek spent most of his time shovelling broken rock into buckets; his ears and brain maddened by the eternal click of pick or hammer on stone. In the evenings there were convivial gatherings round the camp-fires; tales of miraculous 'finds'; racy, coarse, interminable talk of money and women and

the drink; talk from which a man could extract much quaint and varied knowledge of human nature in the rough.

But the work itself was back-breaking and monotonous. It lacked the one redeeming feature of farm drudgery, the sense of ministering to life: and it did not take more than a week or two for Maguire to be seized with a conviction that the wealth of Croesus awaited them had they but the 'spunk' to fling away their 'ruddy shovels' and go prospecting on their own. Derek confessed that he was heartily sick of his shovel: and Foxy Lee — after jeering at them — opined that he had best keep an eye on their movements, just to see what colour of fools they made of themselves.

So they left camp, with their friend the handcart, and wandered over the country, tapping likely rocks, 'dollying' samples; and, when evening came, hunting rabbits in the bush.

Personally Derek was convinced nothing would come of it: but the adventure of the thing amused him, and Maguire's air-castles, and the businesslike intensity of Foxy Lee, who had only come out to spy on their folly.

And behold, in less than two weeks, the incredible had come to pass —

They had struck a vein of ore in one of the lesser dykes, and had heard, with unbelieving ears, Foxy's solemn declaration that he was a Dutchman if that vein didn't yield thirty ounces to the ton.

That was the prelude, merely. In less than no time their news was abroad; a fresh camp sprang up; shafts were sunk; gangs of rough, hardened workmen poured in from all over the district, and they found themselves famous. Later on, they might find themselves rich. It began to look like a big thing; and the prevailing excitement swept even Derek off his feet. He, too, ventured to build air-castles; to dream of justifying himself and his crazy adventure and giving practical proof of that devotion to Avonleigh that lay, like a hidden jewel, in his heart; — inexpressible, unexpressed.

But the dream dissolved in mist. The air-castles fell to earth in very dusty ruins. Too soon their vein of ore showed

signs of petering out. Excitement had reached high-water mark; and the downward swing of the pendulum had an ill effect on the rougher element in camp. Derek had never heard so much foul language even among men who were no carpet-talkers at their best, and it sickened him. But sheer disgust of the whole thing failed to take the edge off his own keen disappointment; and his mind reacted on his body, that now showed signs of resenting the drastic change of life and climate and food. He, who had seldom known a headache, suffered from a constant oppressive ache across his brows. A paralyzing lassitude hung upon his limbs and befogged his brain. He moved like a sleep-walker through a nightmare of cursing, brawling men.

From this unnatural apathy he was roused by the discovery that he had been robbed one night of nearly half his little store of notes and gold. That fired his temper and spurred him to action.

"I'm off out of this hell-hole, Maguire," he said next morning after announcing his loss. "I've had enough of it to last me a lifetime. Come if you like. If not, I'll go alone."

"An' where will ye be going, in the devil's name?" asked the amazed Maguire, who had so far taken the lead.

"Anywhere — away from these drunken thieves. The coast for choice. Will you come?"

And Maguire — after consideration — decided that he would. A fat roll of notes was burning a hole in his pocket; and Jamestown laid itself out for the benefit of men in that enviable condition.

So to Jamestown they returned, striking across country to the nearest railway.

It was a small, prosperous place, harmless-looking enough, with its shops, hotels, and drinking saloons along the shore and its dwelling-houses scattered among the sand-dunes behind. Yet here, in a few weeks, a man could experience enough to shatter any lingering faith in human nature that he might happen to possess.

A dead weight still seemed to hang on Derek's limbs and brain. For the moment he had no clear aim or plan; only a passionate longing to go straight back to the clean, decent life

of his own kind: and the sight of the sea, that should have refreshed him, only made matters worse. Maguire, it must be admitted, found him anything but a lively companion — and Maguire was 'out for a spree.' His own head being made of cast iron, he and his friends did their well-meaning best to enliven Derek with generous doses of the foul stuff sold as whiskey in the saloons of the town. It was their simple, infallible prescription for driving dull care away —

Derek looked back on those first two days at Jamestown as on a nightmare many degrees worse than the last week in camp; for the cogent reason that he himself had, in a measure, shared the general degradation. For forty-eight hours he was like a ship without a rudder; his brain blurred with the fumes of drink and bewildered with the noisy hilarity of bar saloons; his detached self, somewhere up in the clouds, looking on cynically at what men call 'life.'

There had been brief clear moments of exaltation and excitement. One of these had culminated in a free fight. There had also been women . . .

Sickened by the talk of tipsy men, Derek had turned to these with something like relief: — and had discovered too late the depths of his mistake . . .

On the third morning he awoke with a mind painfully clear and pockets painfully empty. 'Dull care' had taken flight with a good many other things. The cure was complete — and lasting.

Derek hated, though he could not easily banish, the memory of those few days. He lacked Van's art of convenient forgetfulness; and the first blot on his 'scutcheon' was no light matter to this sturdy, self-contained young Englishman, with never a trace of the Pharisee in his composition. He and his particular set at Trinity had worked and played too hard to have time or taste for emulating the 'nuts' in respect of wine, women, and cigars. Most of them had lived strenuously and frugally — with intervals for unlimited refreshment — and had kept straight as a matter of course. To Mark and Derek, in partic-

ular, the traffic that makes night hideous in the streets of great cities seemed a challenge to the apostles of progress, the dreamers of dreams. For themselves, they could only resolve to try and live in line with their young, clean convictions. It is the most that the unorganized individual can do — and it is much.

Now, Maguire and Jamestown had tripped him up; and Derek was at once too honest and too proud to gloss over the unwelcome fact. In the skeleton diary of his wanderings, that he kept for reference, the three dates were bracketed together above the following entry: "Made a proper beast of myself, with M.'s friendly assistance. The first time. Never again if I know it. I've had my lesson. Was feeling all to pieces when I arrived. But no good whining or making excuses. Fear I didn't improve matters by slanging poor old M. when it was over. He's been reared differently. He meant no harm. Good company and a good chap, but I'm not sorry to be quit of him. I'd give all my savings and a sight more to make a bee line for Home or Bombay. I've made such a rotten poor start. All the more reason I should stick it out, of course, — and I will. Better luck perhaps Canada way . . ."

In that dim hope — for he had small faith in his own luck — he left Jamestown and parted from Maguire, who had struck up a violent friendship with the bartender and lost his heart, temporarily, to one of 'the girls.' Derek did not soon forget him; but he never heard of him again.

By coasting steamer and rail he made his way back to Adelaide, and there squandered all that was left from the wreck on a second-class ticket to Vancouver. That wonderful voyage across the Pacific should, at least, be made in cleanliness and comparative comfort. His familiar Norfolk coat and flannels helped him soon to feel more like himself again; and even to review, with a queer, detached interest, the doings of one Derek Blunt on the Continent of Australia.

Before him lay Canada, land of boundless possibilities; a name to conjure with. His own possibilities, of course, were strictly limited. Canada, like Australia, would have no use for all the varied knowledge he had imbibed at Oxford. Her

first question would not be, "Who are you?" or, "Who was your grandfather?" but, "What can you do?" By his practical answer to that a man must stand or fall out here in the West.

He cherished in his letter case a certificate from the friendly Australian farmer; and he had a vague idea of trying to get work on a prairie homestead, so as to learn a little more about practical farming. He had also a vague idea that prairie homesteads did not grow wild along the coast of British Columbia: an idea confirmed by a fellow passenger who hailed from Vancouver, and by his own first sight of that imposing coast line: sharply jagged mountainous fiords and inlets, mantled everywhere with mighty forests that swept darkly down to the tideway and were streaked at intervals with narrow lanes, like partings in a thick head of hair.

"That's whar hand-loggers have bin at work," his new friend told him. "Logging's the soundest proposition around here, take my word. No shakes, though, foolin' with agents. Yew come along with me to a slap-up logging hotel whar I'm known, and I guess I'll soon put you in the way of a start."

Derek was to learn that this friendly spirit, this readiness to give any stray or stranded human a helping hand, is the spirit of Canada at her best: and for that alone he must have loved her because of the same streak in himself.

It was in that 'slap-up' logging hotel that he had met Abe Callander, and so eventually had cast anchor in Number One Camp. For once in a way 'the Luck' had smiled on him, and, taking one thing with another, she seemed disposed to smile on him still —

The long ride, the silent companionship of Kitts and the forest, had almost charmed away his mood of depression: and when at last the full glory of lake and mountain burst upon his view, it slunk off altogether for very shame. On such a day and in such surroundings, he must be a churl, or the saddest man alive, who could feel at odds with creation. Derek, being neither, shook himself mentally, and defied Mrs. 'Maggots' or Symes to spoil his brief holiday.

CHAPTER III

*We can never attain complete success in this quest,
but we can always be advancing to clearer knowledge.*

THE TRUE SCEPTIC

THE railway siding that was Derek's objective consisted of a platform and a shack in charge of one 'Scotty,' a well-known local character, whose chief duty, in his own phrase, was "to see that they planks and they ties¹ dinna rin aff thegither the nicht." Incidentally, he imbibed enough whiskey, most nights, to ensure unbroken slumber, though the heavens fell. Derek thoroughly enjoyed a yarn with the old sinner while waiting; and on these occasions Kitts was always left in his charge.

In the courteous little train that halted by request at the siding, passengers were few, and chiefly connected with Windyridge Mine; but in the steamer the crowd was quite promiscuous. Officially there was one class, by courtesy called 'first.' Humanly, there were many classes; and these crystallized automatically into sharply divided groups. Man may rhapsodize about equality, world without end. Nature, in her wisdom, will have none of it: and 'though you drive Nature out with a pitchfork, she always comes running back.'

The miners from Windyridge, four large handsome Swedes, joined a party of their own kind from the Slocan. In that group, the bottle and snatches of song circulated freely. In the commercial group, talk of deals and commissions took the place of drink; and through it all ran the drawling cadence of a very American voice, insisting on the vital importance of closer trade relations between Canada and the You-nited States. They were natural-born twins, he insisted superfluously. Geography gave Amurrica the pull all the time; and she wasn't such a blamed fool as to quarrel with the sitewation. . . .

¹ Sleepers.

A lesser group, astern, was obviously British. Derek knew two of the men by sight; retired Army officers, who wore their rough clothes 'with a difference.' They were listening, with slightly bored amusement, to a youngster evidently new to the West and disgruntled by Canada's blunt demand that the man who aspires to earn her dollars shall put his back into the process. As that part of the programme did not appear to suit him, he was indulging in the cheap retort: "No damn use for this beastly country. No place for a gentleman . . ." and so forth.

He did not seem to care who overheard these praiseworthy remarks; and Derek avoided the group, partly because of an acute desire to kick that egregious youth, partly because he preferred promiscuous listening and enjoying the evening glory of lake and mountain, to which his fellow passengers paid no heed. For most of them — as he very well knew — this majestic region, which they farmed and mined and prospected, was simply so much potential lumber and 'canned stuff,' 'white coal,' and raw mineral wealth.

But if they cared nothing for the eternal hills, neither did the hills care one jot for their pigmy activities and preoccupations. On either side of that narrow, winding lake they towered — aloof, savage, resplendent; heights piled on heights, to the ultimate snow line; a very ocean of mountains; so fierce, so remote, so utterly untamed by man. Here the blue sheen of a glacier, there a fang-like peak, splashed and streaked with snow. Round the next bend, a rocky bluff darkly crowned with forest; and lower down, on more shelving slopes, the fairy mantle of trees in new leaf. Lower still, in coves and lakeside ranches, the transient snow of orchards, the first prim, ordered patches of tilled land in this unfettered region of earth. And down, fathoms down, in the blue-green waters, a crystal-clear, inverted vision of more crags, more bluffs, more splashes of new leaf and blossom.

Through that inverted vision the busy little steamer nosed its way; stopping here to deliver, there to pick up, letters, parcels, or freight; while the miners boozed and the American argued, and the snows began to take colours and the shadows

deepened from purple to black, and Derek fell into casual talk with a tough, grizzled lumberman, full of yarns and grievances about 'graft' and 'political pull' that closed great tracts of country against *bona-fide* loggers for the profit of mere speculators . . .

Derek decided, for the fiftieth time, that a Lake steamer was an ideal form of locomotion. He was in no hurry to reach his landing stage; yet it would be very pleasant to see them all again; to enjoy, even for one night, the seemly securities, the good familiar sense of Home. His connection with Macrae dated from early autumn. There had been a slack time in the camps: and, instead of 'blowing in' his wages at Vancouver, he had spent two months on Macrae's little ranch, fruit-picking and making himself generally useful. Symes, rather to his surprise, had followed suit for a month: and this was the manner of their mutual introduction to Lois Aynes.

She was a refined, fragile-looking creature; the nearest thing to a lady that Derek had encountered since leaving home. Her position at Macrae's was a cross between lady help and nursery governess to two children aged five and seven. Her chief interests appeared to be reading novels and 'passing the time' with one or another of the men on the ranch. This was natural enough, and probably harmless enough; though, for the girl's sake, Derek would have liked to feel more certain of that last. Symes had not stayed long enough to be of any account. It was Jos Agar, one of the foremen, who had chiefly roused Derek's distrust. He was a big, powerful fellow, rough-mannered with his mates, but soft-spoken when he chose. That he fascinated Lois had long been apparent to every one, himself included; and Derek saw elements of tragedy in the affair, which invested her with a touch of pathos in his eyes. Her confiding ways gave him much the same pleasant thrill as when Bill Margett or 'Salie Macrae slipped a clinging hand into his own. So, to her shy advances, he had responded in his reserved, unhurried fashion; and an easy friendliness had sprung up between them. Since then he had paid brief visits to the Ranch whenever opportunity permitted; and occasion-

ally she wrote to him; untidy, impulsive notes, giving him news of them all.

The last one, received a few days ago, ended with the childish appeal: "Do come along soon and liven us up. All the fruit trees are out and it's like fairyland. I hate giving lessons this weather. And the children hate them worse than I do. 'Salie sends a kiss. Suppose I can only send regards! Very sincerely, Lois Aymes."

That note set him wondering — had Agar sheered off and was she feeling bored in consequence? Well — he would soon know now. It eased his sense of separation to feel he had a real link with the homely human interest of it all.

The sky was flushed with the aftermath of sunset, and the waters had taken on a purple sheen, when the little steamer ran alongside Beulah Landing. Macrae's homestead was little more than a mile inland: and very soon Derek was in the Ranch itself. His road ran along a strip of high ground, sloping away, on either hand, to rows of pear, plum, and cherry trees in full bloom. It was like fairyland, as Lois had said; and a little farther on he halted and stood looking down at it all . . .

Suddenly he became aware of a shadow moving between the trees. As it emerged into a clearer space, he discovered it to be a man and woman so closely linked that they made one outline; and, with a distinctly unpleasant shock, he recognized — Agar and Lois Aymes. The man's arm was round her and her uncovered head rested against it. In the open, Derek could distinguish details; the gleam of her hair, the tilt of her slim body towards him. And while he watched they came to a standstill, as if in earnest talk. Then, impulsively, Lois turned to Agar, her head tilted backward, her face lifted to his —

And Derek, with a tingling, uncomfortable revulsion of feeling, turned sharply away.

What did it all amount to? He challenged Agar, mentally, as he strode on through the gathering dusk. Mrs. Macrae ought to keep stricter watch over a girl like that in a world of rough, casual men: though in truth the good soul had more than enough to occupy her from morning till night.

As he stepped on to the rose-covered veranda, she welcomed him with her large smile and possessive grip: a brisk, capable woman in the middle thirties; candid, yet good-natured, and of curiously unfeminine outline. All her bones seemed a size too large. Her hips had no alluring curves. Her face was the shape of a friendly brick, and much the same colour, set with a pair of very blue eyes. Her cheap print 'shirt-waist' was finished with a man's collar and tie; and her ill-cut tweed skirt bore the hall-mark home-made. Withal, she managed to produce a general impression of comeliness that emanated from within. "I'm square and I act square," she would tell you, with her smiling candour. And it was true. With the help of one inestimable Chinaman, she did all her own housework, washing, and baking; yet generally found leisure to be at ease with her sewing from five o'clock onward. Derek had taken a liking to her from the first, and she frankly returned the compliment.

"It's real good to see you again," said she, with patent sincerity. "I've kept a nice bit of supper hot. And d'yousuppose that young scapegrace, Al, would go to bed till you'd come? Not he! They're off somewhere just now. Guess Lois has her eye on them. The spring's gone to her head some. But she's not been looking quite so dandy lately. Her cough worries her."

Still talking, she vanished into the kitchen, and reappeared with a half-demolished meat pie, which she supplemented with home-made bread, cheese, waffles, maple syrup, and a bottle of light beer.

Then she sat down by him, a stocking over one hand, a daggerlike needle in the other. The supper-table was set across one end of the living-room. At the other end, a few cane chairs, a round table, and a hired cottage piano were grouped about the stove. Macrae himself, a hard-headed, hard-drinking Scot, lived chiefly in his 'office,' where, at present, he and a few congenial spirits were playing 'slough.'

And, while Derek did full justice to his belated meal, and the darning-needle stabbed 'Salie's stocking, Mrs. Macrae's flow of

talk took on a more confidential tone. Lois seemed rather on her mind.

"She did oughter marry, that girl," was her sage conclusion; and Derek opined that the odds seemed in favour of it.

"She's full young, though, isn't she?" he added, helping himself to more pie.

"Just turned twenty," Mrs. Macrae informed him with a sidelong glance of which he was placidly unaware. "Plenty girls marry earlier; and she's a lone thing, poor dear. No belongings on earth but a stepmother, who nags her life out because she's soft and feckless. Fact is, she wasn't reared to earn her living. Her poor father never thought she'd need. For she's of good stock, Derek Blunt. Her dead mother was my first cousin. That's how she's here: and she does her best, poor child! But, as I say, she'd ought to marry. The man's her line: and mebbe that's about the best you can say of a woman."

"Yes — perhaps — if she hits on the right one."

"Well, I guess she will — if he gives her half a chance."

A lurking significance in her tone prompted Derek to say frankly: "You don't mean Agar?"

The note of disapproval was unmistakable; and she misread it utterly.

"Sakes, no! They've been fooling round some. But there's nothing *to* it. You can take my word. Jos isn't the kind to marry. He can get all he wants without that. And Lois, well — she fancies him. But — my! if men and women had a call to marry all those they'd fancied, we'd need to be Turks and Mormons outright to keep the accounts square! Don't *you* worry. If Lois *is* a mite feckless and young of her age, she's a good girl — a *good* girl!" Mrs Macrae repeated with what seemed to Derek unnecessary emphasis. And suddenly he perceived, with a jarring shock, that the kind soul was by way of offering comfort to a discouraged lover!

At that, he plunged desperately into disjointed talk about his journey; and thanked Heaven when the vagrant children charged into the room. But respite was brief; for Al had long overstayed his bedtime, and now his mother was adamant.

"Want Delek to tuck me in," the boy whimpered, clinging to his friend.

"Sure thing, old chap — if you don't kick up a fuss," Derek reassured him soothingly.

"Well — of all the spoil boys!"

The speaker was not Mrs. Macrae; and Derek looked up with a slight start. There, in the veranda doorway, stood Lois Aymes . . .

Framed in a background of summer darkness, with the light full upon her red-gold hair, she looked fairer, more fragile than usual; and as much out of place in the wild West as a lily-of-the-valley in a cabbage patch. She wore a simple gown of dull blue linen, with a Quaker collar that revealed the swanlike curve of her throat. But the lines of her figure were too immature, too slender for grace. Her cheek-bones narrowed unexpectedly to the oval of her chin; and her eyes had a deceptive far-away look. The chief charm of her face lay in the mobility of her softly sensuous mouth.

Though she apostrophized the boy, her welcoming smile was for Derek, who returned it with a touch of constraint.

"So you really *have* come," she began. "I wondered —"

"Well, you might have come along sooner to find out," Mrs. Macrae took her up, with a touch of asperity. "And you'd ought to bin minding the kids. After dark, too. What kept you so late?"

Derek, aware of her faint hesitation, hated himself for knowing the truth and knowing that she would conceal it.

"I got walking too far," she said rather hurriedly. "It was lovely among the trees. I didn't notice how the time went. Then I had to hurry back. I'm sorry. Come along, Al."

But Al clung stoutly to Derek. "You put me *all* to bed," he began coaxingly.

And Derek, jumping at the Heaven-sent chance of escape, swung the small boy up onto his shoulder.

"Don't say 'No' to us, Mrs. Macrae. Promise I won't stay fooling with him. And I'm sure Miss Lois is tired after her walk."

So between them they carried the day.

When he returned, Lois was at the piano, crooning a love song; Mrs. Macrae engaged with the inevitable stocking; and Rosalie, curled up on the cane settee, clasping the halma-board, obviously awaiting him. She was a thin, overgrown child and not pretty; but Derek was quite uncritical with children. In the rare cases when they were obnoxious, he unwaveringly set it down to their elders.

"Let's play 'Stalking,'" she whispered as he sat down by her. 'Stalking' was a game he had invented one evening because the rules of halma were beyond her. His solitary piece was the Enemy, her nine were the Bold Bad Brigands; and the Enemy stalked them. For 'Salie the game never lost its thrill; partly because Derek stalked her without mercy; and never patently allowed her to win.

And while they played, Lois, at the piano, was singing: "Oh, come, my love — Oh, come, my love with me," in tones so frankly sentimental that Derek felt quite uncomfortable. The recollection of Mrs. Macrae's discreet encouragement did not serve to mend matters. He had meant to stay over Sunday night. Now he decided to leave that afternoon.

He was thankful when she left the piano and came over to watch their game.

"How *can* you keep on at such nonsense?" she suddenly remarked.

"It's not nonsense," Derek answered, without looking up. "It's a rattling good game."

"Well . . . it's long past her bedtime. You *do* spoil them —" But 'Salie clutched the board.

"Oh, we must finish — we must! I still *can* corner him."

"Well, be quick about it," Mrs. Macrae interposed with surface severity; and for once Derek was guilty of conniving at the process.

Then she ran off, and Lois took her place. This time, there was no concentration on the game. Lois looked much more often at Derek than at the board: and when he beat her hollow, she simply laughed and said: "Try again."

In a general way their game would be enlivened by interludes of mild chaff; but to-night he was acutely aware of Mrs. Macrae, in the background, putting a wrong colour on his innocent remarks. Nor were matters improved when Lois began to look pathetic and tried to catch his eyes between the moves.

Once she left the room for a few minutes; and Lois gave the board a little petulant push.

"It's a fool game. I'm sick of it."

"That's all right," Derek said, smiling, and sweeping up the scattered pieces. "I like straight speaking."

"Do you?" She gave him a shy look. "Say—it's stupid sitting here. Let's walk in the veranda. There's a moon and the honeysuckle's just sweet."

At another time he would have consented; but to-night he did not dare. "Better not," he said. "You look tired this evening."

She glanced at him through her long straight lashes, red-gold like her hair.

"That's just an excuse. You're cross with me."

"Honour bright, I'm not. But we can talk quite as well sitting here."

At that moment Mrs. Macrae returned: and by the end of the evening his impulse not to stay over Sunday had hardened into a decision.

Next morning, when Lois took him out to see her fairyland, she had an inspiration.

"Let's have supper here to-night. *You* ask her. She never says 'No' to you."

This was disconcerting; but Derek held his ground. "I would, like a shot," he said, smiling at her eagerness, "but I'm afraid I can't stay. I've too much business on the other side."

It hurt him to see her soft mouth quiver like the mouth of a chidden child.

"Well, you *are*—!"

"Oh, no, I'm not!"

But her disappointment was too keen to be laughed off.

"Then what makes you seem so different, and go rushing off like this? No one 'ud reckon we're s'posed to be friends —"

"We are, though, real friends," Derek seized upon that safe and blessed word. "If I could ever help you — if you were ever in trouble — then you'd know —"

He broke off rather lamely; and she sighed. "Oh, I do know. But it's not much shakes being friends, if it's only — when you're in trouble —"

"It's not only then," Derek consoled her gently. It was all so young that he began to feel a fool for running away. "But that's when you can tell the real thing from the sham."

"Yes, I guess that's so," she admitted without enthusiasm. "But I do want my picnic. — And the kids would love it."

"Well, we'll save it up for next time."

"Next time there'll be mosquitoes and no cherry blows. *This* time's the only time — for anything."

"That's philosophy!" Then he too had his inspiration. "Look here, why not middle day? Just you and I and the imps. I'll fix it up. You leave it to me."

She was radiant. He had not disappointed her; yet he had managed to hold his ground. For a reputed muddler, he considered he had done rather well. Of course it would confirm Mrs. Macrae in her crazy notions; but after all, why shouldn't the children enjoy their picnic?

They did enjoy it to the top of their bent; and, later on, Derek departed with their shrill "Come again soon," sounding pleasantly in his ears.

And he could not come again soon — bad luck to it — simply because Lois Aymes was not the child he had taken her for, and Mrs. Macrae was bitten with the matchmaking instinct of her kind. No escape anywhere from the woman complication, which did not seem to him by any means the first consideration in life. It was confoundedly annoying; the more so that, in his reserved fashion, he had grown fond of the girl. He was haunted uncomfortably by her pathetic look at parting and the clinging clasp of her hand . . .

"And that's an end of *that*," he reflected ruefully, as he

leaned upon the taffrail staring down into blue-green unfathomable depths.

By the time he reached his hotel at Nealston, the morning's cloud of depression had returned; and with it the craving to get away, to be himself again.

The girl at the bureau handed him a letter from Bombay; for the hotel was his official address, whence correspondence was forwarded on. Though unpretentious, it was thoroughly comfortable, with a good cuisine. He allowed himself, on these occasions, the luxury of a decent dinner, a bottle of wine, Home papers and a real armchair. He found that abstinence rather increased than diminished his appreciation of these things. To-day he went straight up to his room and established himself on the strip of balcony, with his letter and his *Weekly Times*.

MY DEAR BOY [Lord Avonleigh wrote], —

I haven't much time this morning, but I can't let the mail go without sending you word of us, as I know from experience that any sort of letter is welcome when one is quite cut off from the things of Home. I may add that occasional letters from your end are very welcome also. Aunt Marion — who is very fond of you — suffers from periodical qualms as to what you may be up to. It would be an act of consideration to keep her posted up a little oftener. And though Mother may not say very much, the same remark applies to her. I am philosophic enough to accept the fact that silence probably means all is well; but I admit that a sight of your handwriting would give me great pleasure. We have good news from home. Things seem to be going well and young Schonberg turning out a success. I have now every hope of persuading Mother and Van to come out in October and winter here. A pity you can't complete the party. But no doubt you are well occupied solving your own problems and imbibing first-hand knowledge! An ounce of it is worth a ton of the other kind; and I appreciate your constancy of purpose. Some day, God willing, we shall see you again. At any rate let us hear from you.

Your affectionate father

AVONLEIGH

Derek brooded a long while over that letter, which so vividly brought before him his father's keen face and hawklike eyes.

Not a word about himself or his health. So like him! Still more like him the friendly dig about first-hand knowledge, that might or might not contain an under-note of sarcasm. The touch about constancy of purpose rang true and warmed his heart. But — judged by results, what did that constancy amount to after all?

Not for the first time, a chill trickle of doubt ran through him — Was he doing any earthly good to himself or any one else by this freak of lumbering? Or was he simply wasting three of the best years of his life? He had felt so splendidly sure when he took the plunge — and what had come of it?

Certainly he had solved no problems; but he had gleaned some strange and varied knowledge — for what it was worth — of human nature in the rough. He had learnt to see his England through other than English eyes; to regard her more critically, yet with a deeper pride in all that she stood for, wherever her spirit held sway over the minds of men. In Australia and Canada, he had come to know her as never at Oxford or Avonleigh; for great, striving countries should be seen from afar if we would have them in the pure idea.

As for getting into closer touch with the men of another social order, he had at least got sufficiently inside that problem to discover its immensity; to realize that the thing could not be achieved in eighteen months of casual labour: possibly, not in half a lifetime. If so — where, in the name of common sense, was the use of hanging on? And as to constancy of purpose — was not sheer obstinacy nearer the mark? There spoke the voice of the tempter: and in the hope of silencing it, Derek glanced again at his father's letter.

One sentence leaped from the page: "I have now every hope of persuading Mother and Van to come out in October . . . A pity you can't complete the party."

In October, they would all be together having no end of a good time; while he, self-banished, would be picking somebody's confounded fruit or working at the mills. There was no earthly sense in it. All the old jars and rubs seemed, at this

distance, of a transient insignificance beside his deep-rooted love of them all, the stir of kindred blood in his veins —

And suddenly it flashed upon him that, by then, two years would be up! Let him stick it out till October: then honour — and obstinacy — would be satisfied. His flagging spirits went up with a run. He would say nothing yet awhile. Like Stevenson's lantern bearers, he would keep his new-lighted hope buttoned up under his coat; and be content to know that it was there. Later on, he would write and announce his intention of coming to complete the party.

He was seized with boyish impatience. Six months seemed suddenly an eternity to wait. Anything might happen. But he would not be frightened into ignominious surrender. He had made up his mind to hang on till the two years were up — and hang on he would: let Fate do her damnedest!

Meanwhile — he was hungry and thirsty and thoroughly in the mood for a good dinner.

CHAPTER IV

*We who make
Sport for the gods, are hunted to the end.*

BROWNING

BACK in camp, with a secret lantern buttoned under his coat, Derek settled down to his logging again with a will. For the next month or two they would be working at high pressure. From morning to night, forest and clearing resounded with the ringing notes of axes on wood, clatter of steel cables and the crash of falling trees. Some nights they worked overtime by flare, while the pines performed a ghostly shadow dance around them, and the large friendly figure of Maggots prowled amongst them, with his war cry: "Get to it, boys! Get to it, all the time!"

And what blessed dreamless sleep was the guerdon of their health-giving toil! Better than town work any day. Clean Nature all about you. Her tempers and pests to put up with; her strength to pit your own against, in place of the frauds and jealousies of men. Work that called for endurance, for the triple dexterity of hand, eye, and brain; and, by supper time, made a man 'feel good all over,' at peace with himself and his kind. In these early summer days, when the whole camp was putting its collective back into Abe's big contract, and Abe was sending up word that they were 'the straight goods every jack of them,' and the sun shone and the chipmunks chirruped, Derek felt more keenly alive than ever before to all that most satisfied him in the surroundings and the life: — the flattering knowledge that one's scrap of work counted, because, in this vast world of logs and loggers, trees were more plentiful than men; the friendliness that would go a long way round to give one of the boys a hand; the unflinching spirit that would admit no 'ifs' or 'buts'; that bade a man stand up to difficulties and

use his native common sense, if he desired to win the respect of his fellows and to keep his job: in brief, the spirit of the West.

The essence of that spirit had been rubbed into him, at the start, by big, kindly Mick Sayers. "Don't you never let on you can't do this nor that," had been his private injunction. "You go right ahead every time. Use yer own horse sense an' leave the boss to do the worryin'"; which sound advice, boldly acted on, had pulled Derek past more than one critical corner. Mick, himself, was an all-round skilled man, close on thirty. At the moment, he was 'undercutting'; and Derek, on his return, was asked to take over the vacancy left by Symes, whom the merciful Maggots had merely shifted onto less skilled work. This meant seeing more of Mick, an arrangement thoroughly congenial to them both.

The Sunday following his trip he devoted to Home letters: a long one to his father, that gave a pleasing general impression of his well-being, and promised Aunt Marion more frequent assurances that he was quite prosaically safe and keeping clear of scrapes.

Certainly, at the time of writing, his sense of well-being was genuine enough. It was late afternoon; and most of the boys were congregated in the store. Derek was alone in the forest, about a mile from the clearing, seated in the shade of a very small, very rough log cabin, built with his own hands, and afterwards contended for with all the quiet doggedness that was in him.

His trick of disappearing on Sundays, or in the summer evenings, had roused first curiosity, then suspicion. Then some one had spied on him and explored. Derek firmly believed it was Symes or Moulin, the French Canadian — a bully and something of a brute. The result had been the discovery and wrecking of his cherished retreat. There was nothing vicious about the proceeding. To them it was simply inconceivable that any sane man should want to be 'so damned private.' And they had registered their protest by using his shelter to feed camp-fires.

Derek had raged inwardly. But he had hardened his heart; and secretly built it up again, elsewhere. Again it had been discovered and wrecked; and this time Derek's anger was white hot; but his Winchester training told. He had no idea how long they were prepared to keep up the argument. He only knew he would not be the first to give in. If he was up against the Western spirit, they were up against the British spirit; and it takes 'some' beating — as they were presently to admit.

For Derek had very secretly removed the ruins of his little shack to yet another spot, and rebuilt it, for the third time, under the outspread wing of a red cedar, within sound of a waterfall, whose unceasing music never wearied his ears. And there the argument ended — to his immense relief.

He discovered, afterwards, that he owed a good deal to the championship of Mick and Joe Smithers, the cheery little cockney, who had christened him 'No — yer don't,' and had an absent-minded way of calling him 'sir' that went to his heart.

By now the whole affair was ancient history. He could even invite a congenial spirit to share his solitude and sample his cocoa. For he kept a small store of things there under lock and key; and, bounded in that friendly nutshell, counted himself a king of infinite space . . .

That week's mail had brought a letter from Jack, at Sandhurst, with the Indian Cavalry in view. Burltons Ltd. was now steadily coming to the fore in the steel and iron and motor world: but the ungrateful Jack tactlessly wanted to know how much English money there was in the concern; how many German shareholders; how many Germans on the board . . .

"The old man's as close as an oyster on the subject," he complained to Derek, his sole confidant. "Evidently considers that sort of thing outside my mental grasp. Schonberg's awfully friendly. But I can't cotton to him and I fancy he knows it. So it's not much sport going home these days; and Gay is still stuck out in Canada. She says it's fine; and why don't I come out and try my hand at ranching and we'd run

the thing together. Rather sport. I'd love to have a look round and get a sight of your good old phiz again."

The letter ended with a flagrant outburst of affection, which an isolated Derek no longer quarrelled with as in the old days. If he still remained sceptical, it was the not unnatural outcome of his home atmosphere: and his patent failure to win close to his mother's heart. Yet, now he had removed himself to the ends of the earth, even she seemed to care a little what became of him. The knowledge was distinctly comforting; though there were ungracious moods in which he wondered how long her solicitude would outlast his return home —?

Another Sunday came round — and yet another: and Derek, mindful of his promise to Bill, begged leave to take the boy down for a jaunt on the Lake, returning Monday. He felt a brief pang when they passed Beulah Landing. 'Salie and Al would be much better for Bill than 'the Pictures' at Nealston. But even while he debated the possibility — his chance was gone.

They returned to camp about noon; and Derek went straight to the shack. There they found Mrs. Margett alone: and, while the child poured out his tale, the woman gave Derek an odd, searching look.

"You've not been to the Ranch?" she asked; and Derek, resenting the question, answered brusquely: "No. It wasn't in the programme."

Again that odd look. "Then I s'pose — you've not heard the news?"

"*What news?*"
"Oh — there's been no end of a commotion —" She glanced at Bill; took him by the shoulders and put him from her, not urgently: "Scoot, old man," she said. "Wash and brush up. I've got business with Mr. Blunt."

When they were alone, Mrs. Margett took an envelope from her desk and handed it to Derek.

"For you," she said, "from Mrs. Macrae. That girl you're so keen about has been at death's door with hemorrhage.

She's pulled round; but the Doc. seems to think the trouble's gone pretty far. He says she'd do better up at Windyridge. If she's well enough, he'll bring her along next week, when he comes to sniff round the camps; and they want I should give her a shakedown for one night, so he can take her on next day. That's all I know. Likely Mrs. Macrae has told *you* a good bit more."

"Yes — of course," Derek assented absently. Her insinuation passed clean over him. Then he turned to go.

"Won't you stay to dinner?" she asked.

"No, thanks."

But she could not let him go without asserting herself. "Poor old son," she said, and caressingly touched his shoulder. "Don't let it down you as bad as all that. Lucky you've not let yourself in."

"*Me?*" he turned sharply, withdrawing his shoulder from her hand. "I was thinking — of her."

She threw up her head and laughed. "That's *one* way of putting it! Guess you're the limit, Derek Blunt. *I* don't know what to make of you."

"Hard lines," he said quietly; and went out, leaving her to make of him what she pleased.

It was twenty minutes yet to the dinner hour. The men were still at work; and the bunk house would be empty. There, seated on a log, with the sun streaming in upon him, he opened Mrs. Macrae's letter. It was a long one and it spared him nothing. They had all been frightened. Lois had been mortally frightened.

"Seems like a kind of judgment on her, poor dear —" she rambled on, confident of his desire to hear all. "For she'd been out late again once or twice. But what's that matter now? The Doc. says he gives her six months. And whatever I did, I was not to let her know. But that bad child, 'Salie, heard him. And what does she do, quite innocently, but tell the poor girl — 'The Doc. says he gives you six months. What's he mean, Miss Aymes?' Poor Lois went all white and fainted slap off. And she's been that queer ever since. I be-

lieve she's scared. Only she won't speak. Jos came around to see her when she was better; and the Lord knows what he said, but it upset her some. It's cruel hard on the poor child. But the Doc. says she's pulled around wonderful; and Mrs. Wilkins, up at the mine, is a good soul. She'll do the best any mortal can. When you see Lois, try and put some heart into her. She thinks the world of you, Derek Blunt. But you'd no eyes. You're too modest by half. And — well, it doesn't bear thinking of —"

The clang of the dinner gong startled him like the trump of doom.

Mrs. Macrae was right. It did not bear thinking of. Yet all that afternoon, while he was 'undercutting,' he could think of nothing else. Lois lifting her face to Agar in the twilight; Lois standing in the doorway, with the summer night behind her and the light on her hair; Lois begging for her picnic because "this time was the only time" —

And now — she had been given six months. She was scared and miserable. And what the devil had Agar said to her —? The whole pitiful tragedy — the stealthy, implacable undermining of a young life — took a painful hold on his imagination and his heart.

As he moved from one splendid tree to another, marking each one for death, he saw himself as a symbol of Fate, the ghostly undercutter, who moves through the forest of human lives, setting his unseen mark on one and another — with how much or how little discrimination? He shook off the idea as morbid; but it haunted him.

He managed, not without difficulty, to write her a few cheering lines; and her brief reply gave him the measure of all she was suffering. For Lois was not given to brevity.

"You're real kind," she wrote, "and I'll be real glad to see you. Do you remember — you said last time if I was in trouble, I'd know the true friend from the sham one. Well — I am; and I do. But it's not much use to any one anyway. And I can't write about it. But — thank you. Gratefully, Lois Aymes."

Ten days later, she arrived with Dr. Rally, in Abe's buckboard. Derek was off duty; for the camp worked early and late, in summer, and had three hours 'slack' in the heat of the day.

"You'd better be around and do the introducing," Mrs. Margett had said with her sidelong look. "Any old excuse will serve!"

So Derek was 'around' when the rough cart — little more than a case on wheels — drove up the main track from the valley; and Lois was so patently glad to see him that he hoped Mrs. Margett's eyes were engaged elsewhere.

In a light summer coat and wide-brimmed hat, the girl looked prettier than ever; and it surprised him to find her so little changed. The hollows under her cheekbones seemed a shade deeper; her soft mouth had a pathetic droop; and once or twice, when she fell silent, Derek caught a strange new look in her eyes. Mrs. Macrae was right. She was scared. All he had ever criticized in her, all the trivialities that had jarred him were submerged in one overwhelming flood of pity. This evening he must talk to her and do what little he could.

Meantime, he was uncomfortably aware of Mrs. Margett's scrutiny and jarred by the Doctor's well meaning chaff. Rally was a big lean Irishman, with a mop of brick-red hair and a laugh fit to lift the roof off; a slap-you-on-the-back sort of fellow, unhampered by the finer sensibilities. Ignorant of 'Salie's misdemeanour, and anxious to cheer up his patient, he treated the whole matter as a joke. Derek could almost see the girl quiver under his kindly onslaughts, and felt thankful when he departed, in a final explosion of laughter, to enliven less sensitive patients in the camps higher up the valley.

By then, Derek's time was nearly up; and he was wondering how far he dared respond to Lois's appealing glance, when Mrs. Margett — bored with the whole situation — came to his aid.

"Better take Miss Aymes and show her around. And you might come back, later on, to supper," she said.

So he took her out and they strolled to and fro in the shade of the pines. She moved listlessly, looking about her with

dreamy unconcern; and Derek, badly at a loss, drew her attention to the grand array of peaks that dominated the valley.

She shook her head at their magnificence, with a small rueful smile. "They're mighty fine. But I hate them. . . ." A pause. "Where's your little shanty you used to tell about? Is it near here?"

"Not very far. It's in the forest, back of the big clearing."

"I'd love to see it — and the waterfall with the deep pool. Couldn't you take me there, this evening?"

"Yes — if you're fit?"

"Of course I am." She looked away from him. "I feel much better now."

"I'm glad. And up there — you'll feel better still."

He saw her wince and cursed himself for a clumsy fool. "Don't *you* get telling lies, like the Doc.," she said very low; and her rebuke smote him silent. There seemed nothing more to say. They both felt so shy and tongue-tied that it was a relief when young Bill charged down upon them and took command of the situation.

"Tell Mrs. Margett not to wait supper," Derek said when it was time for him to go. "Soon as I'm free, I'll get a snack and come along. Billy will see after you."

"Yes, I'll see after her," the boy echoed, with masculine importance and a shy upward glance at the lovely vision, who was quite obviously Derek's princess.

"That's a good chap," Derek said gravely, and went off, leaving them together.

It was near sunset when he returned to find Mrs. Margett alone writing letters. No sign of Lois or Bill.

"Are they out?" Derek asked as she glanced up to greet him.

"Very much out. Your young lady — who looks wonderfully well, considering — sneaked off soon after supper and no one's set eyes on her since."

"Gone!" Derek's heart contracted; and Mrs. Margett saw the fear in his eyes.

"You innocent enough to be scared?" she asked with a touch of amused contempt. "Not such a fool as she looks, that girl. She knows right enough if she stops out there you'll go and look for her. So you'd better make tracks and not disappoint her! Bill's been hunting round like mad."

Derek — too angry and anxious to retort — turned and left the shack without a word.

In the open, he shouted for the boy, who came running to him with a face of dismay.

"Oh, Derry — I couldn't help it — I *did* try!"

Tears were imminent; and Derek laid a reassuring hand on his shoulder. "All right, old man. Don't you worry. I'll be sure to find her. Perhaps she wanted a look round, and she's missed her way."

"Can't I come too?"

"No. I might be late. But I'll bring her back all safe."

The boy sighed and stood looking after him, with dog-like devotion, till he disappeared among the pines.

CHAPTER V

*Heart too soft and will too weak
To front the fate that crouches near;
Dove beneath the eagle's beak.*

EMERSON

FOR all his brave words, Derek had not a guiding idea in his head as to why the girl had gone, or where. Some childish romantic impulse, probably, to explore the forest. He was a fool to have told her about his shanty; but, lacking even the ghost of a clue, that direction would be as good as another.

He paused in the clearing, quiet and empty now. Man, the eternal intruder, had vanished from the scene. There remained only the great silent forest people — the quick and the dead; and the peak in the West wore the afterglow like a halo of glory. But to-night he had no eyes for sunset splendours; no thoughts for anything but one pitiful human fragment wandering somewhere in that dim wilderness of pine trunks and undergrowth and deceptive side-tracks.

Before he had gone many paces, he was checked by a shout behind him. It was Maggot's odd-job boy, running after him with something white in his hand.

"What's it?" Derek asked impatiently. "I'm in a hurry."

"Wa-al," the boy said, grinning, "she arst me to be sure and give you this anyway — that gal from the Ranch. She's gone off in the forest. I tol' her she'd better keep her wits alive an' stick to the track."

"Long ago, was it?"

The boy grinned again. "Less'n a lifetime! Mebbe half an hour — mebbe more."

"Thanks," Derek said curtly and hurried away, tearing open the envelope as he went. It contained a letter unsteadily scribbled in pencil.

I feel I must say good-bye to you and explain. Nobody else really cares a rap. They're sending me up to Windyridge to drag out the misery and get me away from Jos. But I *can't* sit still in that dull hole just waiting and waiting — so I'm going to get it over and done, if that pool you told about is deep enough. It will be easier that way. At least I *hope* so. It's all frightening and horrible, and nobody in the world has any use for me. So good-bye — Derek. It doesn't matter if I call you that now, and you're the only real friend I've ever had. I heard you came to Nealston. Why didn't you come to us? Did you guess about Jos? Well, I'll tell you true. He just fascinated me with his don't-care, masterful ways. You seemed so sober and steady. Jos was fun and he was always there. But I know now that with men like him, if they can't have one girl, another will do. And he didn't lose much time letting me know I wouldn't do because of my wretched cough. And if no man will ever look at me again, there's no sense in life. Oh, I did hate him when he backed out. Men in life don't act like men in books. But I couldn't help thinking *you'd* have been different, and I know now you are worth fifty of him. But now it's too late. And if I've hurt you any, I'm frightfully sorry, and I do thank you from my heart for being so good and kind to your foolish, unhappy

Lois AYMES

Don't try and stop me. It's simply cruel — and it won't be any use. Good-bye.

It had been impossible not to loiter a little while he wrestled with that illegible, unrestrained effusion, that struck at his heart like the cry of a wounded thing heard in the night. It appealed to the most commanding impulse of his nature — the impulse to help; and now he went ahead down the sloping trail with long swift strides.

She said it would be cruel to stop her, to drag out the misery; and he was too honest to deny it. But by choosing to confide in him, she forced upon him the very thing she forbade. He doubted her courage to take the plunge, when it came to the point, in which case she might shrink from the idea of coming back, after that letter. She might lose her way, and very certainly she would be chilled by the sudden drop of temperature at sunset in the mountains. Sheer pity mastered him. Her

very follies, her softness and fecklessness gave her the appeal of a child; and children held a peculiar place in his heart.

On he went in the deepening dusk, peering anxiously this way and that. At last, where the trees fell a little apart, the undergrowth showed signs of being recently trodden. His pulses gave a leap; and swerving aside he followed those faint traces, leaving very definite ones behind him.

In swerving he had turned eastward; and right before him through the pine stems glowed the new-risen moon — tawny-golden, immense; intimate as a living presence in that dim solitude. Derek caught his breath and stood still. He was nearing the little waterfall now; and there, in a patch of open space, the moon showed him what he sought.

On the rocky bank above the pool stood Lois, a mere strip of pallor against the dusky background.

Noiselessly he drew nearer and discovered that her face was hidden in her hands. It had not proved so easy after all: and in the reaction of relief, he could afford to feel annoyed with her because she had come out, Lois-like, with neither hat nor coat to protect her from the evening air.

Softly he called her name; and she swung round, dropping her hands with a gesture unconsciously dramatic.

"Oh! *why* did you come? I told you not!" And it was hard to say whether her cry had in it more of remonstrance, relief, or fear.

"It was the only thing a man could do," Derek answered in, his most matter-of-fact tone. "Thank God, I'm in time."

"There's *no* God!" she flung out wildly, edging away as he drew near. "Or if there is, he cares no more than these terrible mountains what comes to a wretched girl like me. I've prayed and prayed I might be brave enough to jump — and finish it quickly —"

Her voice broke. Sudden tears rained down her face. "But the water looks so cold and I — I didn't think out how it would be. I thought — in one rush it would be over. But — when I got here everything looked so peaceful — so beautiful; and I — I was too frightened to jump, and now — it's all to do again."

"It's *not* to do again — ever." Derek forced himself to speak sternly. She so plainly needed steadyng. "You must promise —"

"I won't promise — I won't," she cried, edging away again, nervous yet defiant. "How *can* you ask me to keep on — simply coughing my life away. Nobody knows how it feels. Nobody cares. They send me into the hills. I hate the hills. They're so big and cruel. My stepmother doesn't want me back; and I hate her, too. I can't stop on with Cousin Rose. It's just a nightmare. I've got to escape — *someday* —"

Again her voice broke; and, to Derek's dismay, she sank upon the ground, hid her face and burst into a storm of tears.

Never, in his limited experience, had he seen a woman so completely lose hold of herself; and the tradition of self-control in which he had been reared made the thing seem almost indecent. Had the circumstances been less tragic, he would have gruffly bidden her pull herself together. But her wound was mortal. He shrank from laying a clumsy hand on it; and the ache of pity was tinged by a masculine feeling that he ought not to be present when the poor child was behaving like this. So he stood there considerably looking away from her to the moon that blossomed like a great night flower among the pine boughs. Then it occurred to his practical mind that she was catching cold: and having found something definite to say he turned to say it.

But at that moment she still further disconcerted him by dropping her hands and looking up, her face disfigured with weeping.

"I thought *you* would be different," she reproached him, with a pitiful catch in her voice, "but you're just as bad as the others. You don't understand — you don't care —"

"I *do* care," he contradicted her, honestly, but with misleading emphasis; and, to his dismay, she caught his hand in hers and pressed it against her tear-wet face.

"Oh, if you care, why do you stand there and say nothing?" she murmured breathlessly, still clutching his hand. "You're the only person who could make things feel better. You're so

kind—so safe—I wouldn't be so frightened. I'd promise you anything—and I'd keep my promise. I was a fool. If I hurt you, I'm ever so sorry—”

And Derek stood there, feeling stupefied and helpless, like a creature caught in a trap; realizing painfully that, by those three words spoken straight out of his heart, he had cut the ground from under his feet. To tell her she had mistaken his meaning seemed as brutal as striking her. Yet—the alternative staggered him.

For the moment he could only compromise matters by taking both her hands and lifting her to her feet with the prosaic remark: “We ought to be going back. It's treacherous in the mountains after sunset. You'll catch your death of cold.”

“So much the better,” she retorted, with a smothered sob.

Derek did not feel called upon to argue that point. Without a word he took off his own rough coat and slipped it onto her. The action brought her almost into his arms. She swayed and would have collapsed against him; but he had just enough presence of mind to grasp her shoulders as if to steady her. And in that moment of contact he knew that to live out a lie was, for him, the last impossibility. By some means, as mercifully as possible, he must contrive to tell her the truth.

“You can walk back, can't you?” he asked gently. “You've knocked yourself to pieces. You're shivering.”

She nodded, clenching her teeth to keep them still. “If you'll hold me . . . I might manage . . .”

“All right. I'll hold you”—he slipped a hand through her arm. “My little shanty's not far off. Better go there first and rest a bit. There's a camp chair, cocoa and milk and things—I can make you a hot drink. Mrs. Margett will be anxious. But you're simply not fit—you're all to pieces.” He spoke rapidly, spinning out commonplaces, as it were holding off the silence that would force out the truth; and all the while he was leading her back to the trail, holding her arm, just firmly enough to support her—no more.

Once or twice she glanced at him under her long lashes; then—“Derek—you *are* queer,” she said, with a small catch

in her voice. "No one 'ud think, the way you behave, that you meant what you said — just now."

"I did mean it," he interposed, seizing the cue she had given him. "Only not quite — the way you took it."

He released her arm and confronted her. They had reached the trail now.

"Not — *that* way?" she echoed, her eyes wide and dazed. "But there's only one way that counts — with a man and a girl. Why did you pretend — it was cruel —"

"I didn't pretend. I spoke the truth — we've been good friends, haven't we? And because we're friends, it hurts me — seeing you suffer. I'm ready and willing to do any mortal thing that I can —"

"Except the only thing that's a mite of use," she murmured with shaking lips. "And it isn't as if . . . it would be . . . for long."

The childlike simplicity of those broken phrases and her pathetic attempt at self-control moved him far more deeply than her tragical outburst of grief. Whatever else he could not do, one thing was certain: he could not leave her comfortless, doomed, uncared for. There was only one way, as she said, and thereupon he resolved to offer her the most he felt able to give.

"Miss Aymes — " he began.

"You might call me Lois."

"Well — Lois," he flung it out with a touch of defiance and his hands closed firmly on hers, that were clammy and cold. "I had to tell you the truth."

Her faint smile seemed to question that painful necessity.

"I said — I'd do anything; and you say you'd feel safe with me. So — will you give me at least the right to protect and take care of you?"

"D'you mean — marriage?" she asked — half nervous, half eager.

"Of course. If I am to be any use, you must take my name. We must go through the form —"

"The *form*!" The blood rushed to her face and she tried to

release her hands; but he held them fast. "I'm to be just a drag on you — and you'll be good to me out of pity? Never! I have — got a mite of pride, if I did — talk wildly. I thought — you cared — or I wouldn't have — spoken. I know — you mean it kindly, but — I'd *drown* myself rather —"

This time she was too quick for him; and, wrenching herself free, she ran blindly, stumblingly back towards the river —

Derek — torn between pity and vexation — sprang after her. In a flash he realized that half-measures must go overboard; and in that flash his decision was made. Her case was desperate. He must go all the way to save her. There was no time to see or think of anything else.

"Lois! Lois! Come back," he commanded. "You *must* listen — I haven't said all."

Some new note in his voice seemed to strike her. She stopped dead and swung round, facing him. "You won't — let me down again?" she asked — and a ghost of a smile glimmered through her tears.

"I didn't let you down — and I never will," he answered gravely: and while the words fell upon his heart like stones, his detached brain noticed what a quaint figure of tragedy she looked in his big loose coat, the sleeves half covering her hands. "Come — be a good girl," he added. "We ought to be back in camp."

She came obediently now — her tragic aspect lightened a little — and laid her two hands on him.

"It's not *only* just out of pity, is it?" she asked, looking anxiously into his eyes. "You are — a little fond of me?"

"I'm very fond of you," he answered truthfully, ignoring the inconvenient half of her question. By way of proof he passed a hand lightly over her hair. She sighed and smiled in one breath. To a man more easily wrought upon she must have seemed sufficiently alluring for purposes of love-making, if no more. But in Derek, at that moment, every sensation was subordinate to the nightmare sense of being snared in silken meshes that he had not the heart to tear asunder.

"And —" she hesitated. "We'll really — be married — soon?"

"Presently," he said — and his hand fell away from her hair. "You must give me time — to see about other work. And you must be good — Lois, and wait quietly at Windyridge till I'm ready for you. Wonderful air up there."

She wrinkled her nose. "I've no use for Windyridge. But I'll be ever so good. And when we're married, I'll slave for you, I'll worship you —"

"No, not that!" he said, so abruptly that she gave him a quick look, like a startled animal. "Now — come along to my little hole. Plans can wait."

Again he slipped a hand through her arm and led her along at a brisk rate; and again she glanced at him once or twice in sheer bewilderment, that he should hold her arm when her waist was available. "Derek," she said, for the second time, "you *are* queer. Haven't you ever made love to girls?"

"Never," he answered simply, looking straight before him. His brief madness in Jamestown scarcely came under that heading. "I'm not cut out that way; so you must make allowances, and not get thinking there's anything wrong." It might prove a useful disability, he reflected, with an ironic flash of humour, like being a duffer at bridge.

By this time the rising moon had conjured the forest into a place of enchantment and eerie mystery. The trail, deeply shadowed in parts, was mottled with pearl-grey patches of light. Stars flashed through the pine branches like diamonds in dusky hair. The brooding silence above and around enfolded them like a ghostly presence.

Lois pressed closer. "Are there wild animals and things?"

"Nothing to be afraid of." And, by way of reassuring her, he just perceptibly tightened his hold.

"Oh, you *are* a dear," she whispered, her head so near his that stray wisps of hair brushed his cheek. And quite suddenly it came over him that he could not face twenty minutes alone with her in his "badger-hole." Sheer funk — he admitted it. Straining at a gnat when he had swallowed the camel. But he

badly needed time to realize the whole incredible situation. And she was such an elastic creature. Already she seemed astonishingly revived.

In a patch of moonlight he paused and consulted his watch.

"I say, it's later than I thought. If you're feeling better — up to it, we really ought to forge ahead and get you your hot drink at the other end. They'll be wondering — it's hardly fair on them."

"I suppose it isn't," she agreed; and her evident reluctance made him feel a brute. Yet it stiffened his resolve. Possibly she hoped it might have the opposite effect.

"I can manage all right," she added, after a small gap of silence. "I'd just love to see your shanty. But perhaps — some other time —?"

"Yes. Some other time," he assented cheerfully — and they went forward a little quicker than before.

Only when they were almost at the edge of the forest he stood still and faced her, a whimsical half smile in his eyes.

"Look here, we inust get you out of my coat and settle just what did happen!" he said. "I hate telling lies; and if I have to, I mostly bungle them. But Mrs. Margett's not precisely an understanding woman, and — it isn't a thing to talk about anyway. We'll have it that you got off the track — lost yourself, and I had a tough job to find you. That'll wash. I'll do the telling — and it's all she needs to know."

"Not about — us?" Lois ventured, shyly. She had never felt shyness with a man before; but more and more she perceived that this man was not as those others.

He shook his head. "Time enough — afterwards."

She sighed and acquiesced. Though he had saved her so romantically, he seemed bent on depriving her of all her little triumphs and satisfactions — this very chivalrous and strangely backward lover.

"I'm — yours now," she added with engaging meekness. "I'll do anything you tell me, if you'll only love me a little. It's all I want in the world."

"Foolish child! If I didn't, we should hardly be here now,"

he said more tenderly than he had spoken yet: and so plainly did her lifted face await the kiss she had every right to expect that no man in his senses could fail of understanding or response.

Very gently he took her shoulders between his hands, closed his eyes and touched her forehead with his lips.

Then a strange thing happened. That simple, unaccustomed act and the ivory smoothness of the girl's skin swept him in a flash miles away from the moonlit forest, from Lois and her tragedy to the drawing-room at Avonleigh and the difficult moment of parting with his mother. So vivid was her transient presence that it was almost as if his lips touched the smoothness of her forehead; and there came to him a whiff of the faint scent she used, the very sound of her serene: "Good-bye, dear. Take care of yourself. Don't do anything rash." Could she have guessed — could he . . . ?

In that bewildering instant he saw it all as through her eyes — the eyes of his own world . . .

Then his brain righted itself with a jar and he found that Lois was sobbing on his shoulder.

The whole thing passed in the twinkling of an eye; but the sharp revulsion of feeling painfully endured.

CHAPTER VI

*Fate, higher than heaven, deeper than the grave,
That saves and spares not, spares and does not save.*

SWINBURNE

AN hour later he was lying in his bunk between two logs that divided him from Mick and Joe Smithers. Joe slept musically, with his mouth open. It gave him a ludicrous air, as if he were trying to shout and could produce no sound. Mick lay on his back, in a wide strip of moonlight. His strong, clean-cut face might have been graven in marble. A restless breeze wandered through the pines like the sigh of a passing ghost; and the long, barnlike room was softly sonorous with the breathing of thirty-four lumberjacks, who had royally earned their six hours of sleep.

The thirty-fifth lay very wide awake; realizing very completely what he had done; or, rather, had been driven to do by the irony of circumstance and the appealing weakness of one unhappy girl. This, then, was the culmination of his great adventure in search of knowledge! Fate, that had thwarted and harassed him from nursery days, must needs pursue him even to the ends of the earth; forcing him from his chosen path; thrusting him into one that he had no ambition to explore. He had kept away from the Ranch solely in order to avoid the very meshes that to-night had entangled him unawares. And he had not even the sustaining sense of having done a chivalrous action. He simply did not see how any decent man, so distractingly placed, could have done otherwise; nor did it occur to him that the worldly-wise young man would never have wandered far enough from the sheep-track to risk stumbling into such a bog. Yet he could see the thing quite clearly from the sheep-track point of view: the view of Van and his

mother who — thank Heaven — need never know of his passing madness. That was how they would regard it; and in truth he felt rather mad himself, now that the chill of reaction had set in and practical considerations came crowding into his brain —

No question, now, of Bombay. He might have known — ! He must give up the logging as soon as Maggots could replace him; and find some occupation wherever the climate or surroundings gave her the best chance. Incidentally, he felt convinced Lois could never run a house. He also discovered, with a shock, that the idea of living alone with her terrified him . . .

That discovery pulled him up sharply. It restored his deadly clearness of vision, the sense of proportion that saved him from inflating pain or pleasure simply because his own ego was involved. Fate — and Lois — had thrust upon him this difficult and delicate job. He must pull it through to the best of his ability. All he asked was that he might be allowed to pull it through alone.

Had it been a question of marrying for life, he would have no right. But it was simply a terrible emergency; and nobody's affair but his own. In his little local world he could easily give the impression of an existing engagement. They might think him a fool if they chose, so long as he could make things easier for Lois . . .

And quite suddenly he fell sound asleep till the strident tones of the cook-house gong called the whole camp to life again.

At the moment of waking, realization smote him afresh. But the thing was done; and a strenuous morning's work left small leisure for brooding. Not till he had bolted his midday meal was he free to put in an appearance at the shack and bid Lois good-bye. They were on the eve of departure. The buckboard was waiting. Rally was engaged with Maggots in the office; Mrs. Maggots was exchanging laboured commonplaces with Lois in the living-room; and when Derek arrived she surprised him by pointedly leaving them alone.

For a moment he stood silent, feeling shy and dismayed;

then Lois slipped a clinging hand into his. Her eyes were radiant. Her soft mouth quivered.

"Oh, Derek — is it really true?"

"It's true all right," he said, smiling. Then a little awkwardly he put an arm round her shoulder and kissed her cheek.

She nuzzled her head against his sleeve, like an affectionate animal. "I believe — Mrs. Margett knows."

"Quite likely. She's no fool."

A pause: and suddenly she glanced up at him. "When?" she asked under her breath.

That simple question so startled him that in self-defence he pretended to misunderstand her. "I'll try and manage Sunday," he said cheerfully. "Then we can talk things over. So be a good girl — and don't get worrying." The voice of Dr. Rally resounded without. "There — time to be off. So it's good-bye—Lois. Not for long!" His lips touched her hair. She clung closer and kissed him shyly just below the ear.

Five minutes later he stood with Mrs. Maggots at the door of the shack, watching the buckboard as it swung round a curve in the narrow road. Then she turned and looked at him — a deliberate look that brought the blood into his face.

"You going to be fool enough to marry that girl?" she asked.

"Yes — we're engaged," he said coolly.

"I s'pose you understand she's some crock? Her lungs are pretty far gone."

He nodded, hating her. "No decent man would throw a girl over because of that."

She smiled her sleepy, sceptical smile. "Has it bin on long?"

"I've known her close on six months; and I'm not one to blab about my affairs. Now of course I must quit logging and see after her — do what I can."

Again that long, deliberate look; but it had a changed quality. "Well — I guess she's in luck! But what'll Maggots say to you quitting just now?"

"I rather think" — he frankly returned her look — "the boss is the kind that will understand."

"Mebbe you're right," she agreed indifferently. "He's soft." "He's *straight*," Derek flung out in spite of himself — and left her.

He was not mistaken. Maggots — though regretful and mildly disapproving — did, in a manner, understand.

"The cards are all ag'in' you," he said gravely, when Derek had made the best he could of a lame tale. "But if a man can't square the cards, he kin always play the straight game. It's a knock losing you. But I'd sooner have you quit than go back on a woman."

Just because Derek's heart went out to the big, simple fellow, whose wife systematically went back on him, he stood there tongue-tied: and Maggots, having cleared his throat, spat scientifically out of the window.

Then he turned his candid eyes full on Derek. "Wa-al, here's luck to you, sonny. She's young; and consumptives, mostly speaking, have nine lives. You may enjoy a good few years together yet — for all the doctors say."

If Derek had been tongue-tied before he was petrified by that staggering attempt at consolation.

"Yes — it's possible — I hope so," he muttered confusedly; then pulled himself together with a jerk. "I hate putting you out. I meant to hang on till the contract was through. But I thought . . . you'd understand . . ."

With that, he made his escape, leaving the mystified Maggots to fall back on his private conviction that women — though the world would be a blank dull place without them — were, generally speaking, the devil; a sentiment which poor Derek would have echoed, at that moment, from the depths of his heart.

"A good few years —" All the afternoon, while he worked, those four words seemed to knock upon his brain like hammer strokes; revealing to him with terrible clearness the character and dimensions of the risk he was taking. That the doctor might be out by a few months was a contingency he had faced; but years —! Years of estrangement from those he loved; years of Lois, eternally clinging, dragging him down. He be-

gan clearly to perceive the essence of his own tragedy: the knowledge that for him all hope of happiness and freedom hung upon the death of one poor, pretty, feckless girl whom he had just promised to make his wife . . .

Kind-hearted Bill Maggots would have bitten his tongue out sooner than have proffered that ironic crumb of consolation, had he guessed the truth.

On Sunday, in the keen freshness of very early morning, he and Kitts set out for Windyridge. It was a long ride, most of it uphill; and it was a glorious ride. Now and again the track meandered through patches of forest; shadowy regions where day was hardly yet born. But chiefly it climbed and curved along the open hillside, falling away to the river-haunted valley with its savage guardian peaks that, at almost every turn, showed some change of aspect, some fresh play of light and shade.

He and Kitts took their time over the journey, yet they came all too soon upon the huddled shacks and buildings of Windyridge Camp; an outcrop of sentient life in that region of rock and stone. At sight of it Derek awoke to the fact that he had formed no immediate plans and had yet to tell Lois who he really was.

He had no difficulty in finding the Wilkins shack. There were but two women up at Windyridge and they baked and washed and sewed for half the men in camp.

Mrs. Wilkins proved to be a plump pincushion of a woman, with a heart that oozed sentiment and kindness. She had made every arrangement for their comfort and privacy that her limited means allowed. A cane lounge, a camp table and raw-hide chair were ostentatiously set out in an enclosed corner of her veranda, a primitive affair, smothered with climbing roses, that thrust their way between the planks and conjured a mere shelter into a veritable bower.

At the edge of the veranda Lois awaited him, looking so fresh and charming in her blue linen, with the sunlight entangled in her hair, that the desperate, fear-stricken girl of a week ago seemed almost the figment of a dream.

The half-shy eagerness of her greeting caught at his heart. Without a word he put an arm round her and would have kissed her cheek; but she turned as if by chance and her lips lightly brushed his. Derek found their soft contact not unpleasant by any means; but the palpable manœuvre checked his impulse towards her.

"That's over, anyway," he reflected, and proceeded to settle her in her chair. But he found himself mistaken. It was only just begun.

"You look a new creature," he said, smiling down at her. "This wonderful air —"

"It's not that." Her eyes were eloquent. "Don't stand there looking uncomfortable. Sit here and smoke."

She drew his chair so close that when he rested an elbow on it she could lean her head against him. He felt a brute for objecting to the arrangement; suppressed a sigh and accepted the inevitable.

"Hope I haven't got to stay up here much longer, Derek," she remarked presently; and he proceeded to explain matters as best he could, addressing his remarks to the crown of her head and the delicate tip of her nose and chin.

"If I quit logging, I could work for Macrae. It's homely there —"

She drew in a sharp breath. "Oh — but — I couldn't. Because of Jos —"

"Were you — in love with him? Did it ever amount to an engagement?"

"I — don't — know. He wasn't one to talk that way. We kind of took things for granted."

"That's rather dangerous."

"Yes — it is. But I'm safe now." She nestled closer and her fingers caressed the back of his hand. "Derry — are you jealous?"

"No! I'm not much given that way."

She sighed: and he added a trifle hurriedly: "I'm sorry the Ranch is no go. But I want to settle you where you'll be happy. Have you got any notion up your sleeve?"

"Well, of course I'd *like* a nice little house in Nealston, where I could see the shops and the cars and the movies. Could you manage that?"

"Yes — I could," he said slowly — and paused. For he saw the moment had come; and he found that he hated telling her. But he achieved it, after a fashion; the bare facts, sedulously unadorned.

Lois, however — her mind saturated with cheap fiction — could be trusted to do the adorning. She listened entranced — amazed. She lifted her head from his shoulder that she might realize him in his romantic rôle; her prince in disguise! And Derek, feeling anything but princely, righted himself in his chair with a very ungallant sense of relief. He foresaw the inevitable question: and the next moment it was out.

"But, Derry — if you've got a fine house and money and a real live Viscount for a father, what's the *sense* of fooling around with a herd of common men?"

He laughed and turned it off. "I'm not fooling around. There are lots of well-born Englishmen doing rough work out here. Very good for them."

"But they've mostly made a mess of things," she remarked sagely. "Have you — ?"

"Not that I'm aware of," he said with a wry smile.

Another sigh from the depths. "You *are* some puzzle, Derry! It seems so stupid — Can't you take me to England?"

"No, I can't," he said bluntly.

"But you've got the money," she murmured.

And he saw that the position would become untenable unless he made a stand once for all. "Look here, Lois — you must take my word for things, or we'll never pull through. I'll do all I possibly can for you. But I've got to stick out here, for the present — *and* I've got to work. The main point is, I have the means to give you a comfortable home and little luxuries and all the care you'll need — doctors and medicines —"

He stopped abruptly — for he saw the shadow of fear creep into her eyes. For a brief, blessed half-hour she had forgotten.

Now the inexorable truth overwhelmed her, and hiding her face against him she burst into tears.

She was the hurt, frightened child again; and all Derek's awkward reluctance vanished outright. If her sentimentalism cloyed and repelled him, her real pain and tragedy moved him to the depths.

He put his arms round her and held her close.

"Poor, dear little girl! I'm a clumsy brute."

"No — no." And suddenly she was convulsed by a fit of coughing that seemed as if it would shake her frail body to pieces. Derek could only hold her closer till the paroxysm passed, and she lay limply against him, her handkerchief to her lips. Presently she removed it, glanced at it nervously, and thrust it into her blouse. Poignant compassion pricked him and he kissed her hair.

"Can I get you anything?" he asked in his gentlest voice.

"N-no." Her breath was still coming in gasps. "It's not half — so bad, with you — holding me."

"I'm thankful for that," he said gravely, and continued to hold her; while she, at intervals, opened her eyes and embarrassed him with a gaze of rapt adoration.

In less than half an hour she was herself again, eager over details and dates. Derek suggested July; just the civil ceremony, no fusses or furbelows.

"Not a wedding dress?" she asked ruefully. "I wouldn't feel married without it."

"Oh, yes, you would! You shall have something quite as pretty, and you can call it what you please!"

She surrendered her wedding garment, with a good grace, and pounced on the honeymoon. Derek — who had left it clean out of his calculations — looked a little blank.

"Are you — death on a honeymoon?" he asked tentatively.

"Of course! It's the best part. At least" — she hesitated, blushing a little — "in novels it always is."

"You read too many novels, Lois, and the wrong sort," he said, swerving from the point.

But she was not to be put off with evasions. The honeymoon was her ewe-lamb and she clung to it with meek persistence. "So ideal, Derry — no one but each other."

"And at the end of a fortnight — any one but each other!" quoth the embryo cynic.

"Oh, no — I could never get bored with you," she countered fervently, taking the wind out of his sails.

"Well, I've warned you," he said, concealing his dismay. "But if you're dead keen, we'll risk it!"

She was radiant.

"Oh — *Boy!* Where shall it be?"

Problem on problem! But he was quick enough to see and seize the chance of modifying his ordeal. "We might do the grand at a good hotel," he suggested. "Or a steamer trip along the coast. Sea air would pick you up."

Mercifully, she rose to the idea: — and at midday, when they joined the Wilkins family for dinner, she was full of it all; her cheeks flushed; the haunting shadow clean gone from her eyes.

To Derek on his homeward ride, the future did not look quite so desperate as it had looked a week ago. He knew very well there would be tragic and terrible things to pull through before the end came. But he had discovered his guiding principle. It was *her* tragedy. His own share of it, however distasteful, would pass. And his own world need never know. For that crumb of comfort he was thankful exceedingly. Like a good hunter, he gauged his fences well ahead; and, on reaching them, was the better able to take them in his stride. He belonged, in fact, to the finer type of pessimist, who looks mischance full in the face, and still goes forward — unhopeful, yet undismayed.

CHAPTER VII

*There is one thing that is stronger than all our
plans about life — and that is life itself.*

MAARTEN MAARTENS

BUT Fate seemed unable to leave him alone. Whether his stoic refusal to be beaten was a negative form of inviting attack, let psychologists decide. The fact remains that two days later she struck him another shrewd blow, in the friendly guise of a letter from Jack.

At first sight it gave him a shock of pleasure. Then he discovered, with a start, that it bore the Nealston postmark and the stamp of his own particular hotel. Pleasure evaporated. Just when his isolation was a blessing, an urgent need —! What the devil? Hurriedly, he tore open the envelope and read:

DEAR OLD DIRKS —

Can you believe the evidence of your eyes? I can see you blinking mightily at the sight of my fist on your own special stationery! Remember what I wrote about Gay and ranching? Well, I've come out to have a look round, armed with an introduction to an English stockman in Calgary, wherever that may be! Fact is, I've had rather a dust-up with my old Dad. Schonberg, of course — our chronic and colossal bone of contention. I got talking too straight about Germany and England, last time I was at home. Old S. turned rather crusty. Dad sided with him. I lost my temper — and there was the devil to pay. Next day the old man rounded on me for being narrow-minded and impertinent. That was one too many for yours truly. I begged leave to point out that as he had spent vast sums on my education he might give me credit for knowing a thing or two. Schonberg *may* be all square; but it's common knowledge that the Germans are playing a low-down commercial game in this country, thanks to our Radical crew. Anyhow, I said

outright that if he was wedded to Schonberg, the less we saw of each other the better. Then Gay's notion occurred to me. Just a chance, if we stuck it out and did well, we might rescue Burltons from the clutch of the furriner! Is it a crazy castle in the air? Notion is I should spend a year or so on this ranch learning the ropes — then we can make our little plunge. Great sport! Can't you chuck and come ranching with me? Better still, have a hand in the little plunge? Put that in your pipe and smoke it. Gay and the Aunt have gone to Victoria now and I'm joining them. Felt I must have a jaw with you first. So let me see you, first possible moment.

Yours till hell freezes

JACK

Derek ran his eye over that amazing letter and could have cursed aloud. Then he read it through again slowly, with a feeling of stunned despair. A fortnight, even ten days earlier, and it might have saved him. Now it was a mockery, a mere feast of Tantalus —

After dinner, he retired to his badger-hole and wrote a brief reply:

DEAR JACKO,

Your bombshell has duly exploded and I'm still collecting the fragments of my scattered senses. It will be great to see you again. But I can't get away this week, so you must come along here. My friend the manager will put you in the way of getting to the siding, where I can meet you with a mount — of sorts. And I can offer you a bunk for the night, if you don't mind roughing it with a mixed lot, mostly good fellows. As to your castle in the air — I'm not so sure if it's an improvement on the Indian Army. But with Burlton blood in your veins I don't wonder you're keen to have a try. For myself — I'm not free now, old man, to come and see you through your tenderfoot trials. Since last I wrote, the unexpected has happened. I've got myself engaged to be married. You can't be more surprised than I am. I met her at the Ranch I told you of. Her name is Lois Aymes. She is pretty and very delicate. In fact there's just been a rather bad illness and the doctor says her lungs are affected — seriously. So it's a sad sort of business for both of us. Just the kind of thing that *would* happen to me. And — see here, Jacko, I'm not telling them at home. She's a dear, good girl, but not exactly their sort. And as there's this trouble, she's better out

here. So here I propose to remain for the present. But I must quit roughing it and make a home for her. Just accept the facts and don't plague me with questions, there's a good chap. I'm keen to hear all your plans and news. So there'll be plenty to jaw about. Come Thursday if you can.

Yours ever

DEREK

Sport the roughest togs you possess, or it will be a case of, "Who's your dandy friend?"

Jack came on Thursday, in his roughest togs, and Derek met him at the siding with Kitts and a brother *cayuse* contributed by Maggots, who had given him half a day off. Jack was in great spirits, admiring everything, and there was 'plenty to jaw about,' apart from Derek's disturbing and rather mysterious communication; and yet —

Every now and then their talk would hang fire, in an odd, unnatural way that robbed their intercourse of its old free-and-easy flavour. Though Derek had always been a 'secretive villain' at best, one could frankly chaff him about it. There had never been the awkward under-sense of having to tread cautiously here, or sheer off altogether there. Also, he seemed to have grown years older and miles farther away.

"Confound the women!" thought Jack, who personally appreciated them as the luckless Derek had never done. And he straightway concluded, with youthful sapience, that the pretty delicate thing was 'no chicken' and had doubtless inveigled old Dirks — who was as innocent as a babe for all his sagacity; and naturally the good fellow wasn't going to give her away. If only he had come out a month or two sooner! It was beastly rotten luck all round —

Later on, in Derek's badger-hole, matters improved considerably. No shadowy third impaired the enjoyment of their picnic supper — canned stuffs, fruit and cheese — washed down with Derek's famous brew of cocoa and milk. Then they lit up and went into Committee on Jack's comprehensive plan.

"The old Dad laughed at me, first go-off," he confessed, looking up at a star that glimmered through the outspread wing of

Derek's cedar — "But when he saw I was in earnest he admitted that, with Gay to keep me on the rails, something might come of it — in time. It's the first year I rather boggle at. And I was counting on *you*, you old sinner."

"Then you should have come before. But here I am anyhow," Derek added, with resolute cheerfulness, "and I can put you up to a tip or two."

He proceeded, without further invitation, to recount certain incidents of his own early days that had not found their way onto paper; — and Jack, as he listened, began to understand why this new Derek gave him an impression of having taken liberties with the calendar.

Too soon their time was up. They must think about getting back to camp; and, while Derek fastened his locker, Jack boldly resolved to approach the forbidden subject.

"See here, old chap," he remarked casually. "You said I wasn't to plague you with questions. But I suppose a pal that sticketh closer than a brother may be permitted to ask — When is it going to be?"

Derek's smile lacked the sudden radiant quality Jack remembered so well. "About the middle of the month," he said.

"Mayn't I offer my services as best man?"

"Lord, no. The registrar at Nealston will do the job. I hate a fuss, and — she has hardly a belonging in the world."

"That explains!" thought Jack, still hugging the inveiglement idea. "And then — what next?" he ventured aloud.

"We thought of a steamer trip up the coast amongst the islands. After that — I hardly know yet."

All in a moment Jack saw his chance.

"Well — I do. You come and stay with us at Victoria. I want you to know Gay; and I'm naturally keen to know — your wife."

Derek started at the unfamiliar word. "I'm sorry, Jacko; I don't want to seem a beast; but — I'd much rather not. And it saves argument if I say so straight."

Jack's face fell. He was more than hurt. He was almost angry. "Well, I'm damned! If you're going to take that line, you may as well chuck me outright —"

To his surprise Derek quietly took hold of his arm.

"Jacko — don't make a blame fool of yourself," he said in a voice that recalled old days. "You forget I hardly know your sister and I've never seen her aunt. It's a bit thick to go giving invitations, in their names, to a pair of stray folk who would probably bore them to death."

Jack laughed. "You won't wriggle out of it that way. If they endorse my invite — will you come?"

And as Derek did not answer at once he went on impatiently: "What's the blooming mystery, Dirks? You're not committing a crime. Of course this cruel bad business of her health makes it — not like an ordinary affair. But you can trust Gay to any lengths for sympathy and understanding. So do give us a chance, old man, if they back me up."

He was irresistible; and Derek had no genuine desire to resist. What matter after all — once the ice was broken?

"Right you are," he said; "we'll leave it at that, if the others are agreeable."

And at sight of the relief in Jack's face, he tightened his hold. "Good old Jacko! Did he have his aquiline nose bitten off by a beast who had lost his manners in the wilds?"

But Jack was very much in earnest. "I don't care a damn about manners. But I suppose a man's allowed to care for his friends?"

"Happy thought! We're in the same boat, as far as that goes. So — if you can work a *bona-fide* invite, we'll come along to Victoria after our trip."

And on that understanding they parted next day: Jack still anxious and mystified; Derek considerably cheered at the prospect of curtailing honeymoon conditions and spending a part of that dreaded month in Jack's society.

CHAPTER VIII

*In her heart hovered the thought of things
Past, that with lighter or with heavier wings,
Beat round about her memory, till it burned
With grief that brightened and with hope that yearned.*

SWINBURNE

It was a clear afternoon of late July, the sky incredibly blue, the air warm and very still. The land-locked strip of ocean, jewelled with a host of lesser islands, lay drowsing in the sunlight, its milky surface rising and falling rhythmically as the breath of sleep. Only passing steamers and small craft set up a commotion of surface ripples that here and there aspired to be wavelets and fell again too lazy to break in foam. And away across the Straits of Juan de Fuca the Olympian Mountains sprang sheer out of the Pacific, their rugged masses of rock and promontory lowering darkly between the opalescent sea and the galaxy of peaks that dreamed and gleamed far up in the burning blue.

Summer at its zenith seemed poised spellbound, a brooding spirit of peace, above the frets and agitations of earth; but Derek, leaning on the taffrail of the Victoria boat, felt in his veins and in his spirit more of the languor than the enchantment of the year's high noon. The sensation was so foreign to him, the root cause so self-evident, that he was doing his best not to be aware of either. He told himself he was tired of idling: but he knew very well that he owned a healthy appetite for idling in the right company. If that wonderful trip up the coast had been made with Mark or Jack —!

But it was Lois — now unbelievably his wife — who leaned on the rail beside him, her arm pressed against his. He could feel all through him that she was aggrieved at his prolonged silence; waiting for him to speak. And the curse of it was that

he had nothing to say. Probably she was in the same predicament; but it was one of her obsessions that, if he fell silent for more than five minutes, he was bored. Whereas, if the truth could be told, the fatal thing assailed him most acutely when he was belabouring his brain to make small talk for her benefit. But the truth — so far as he was concerned — could not be told; and that simple fact subtly vitiated their whole relation. Already they seemed to have exhausted their few topics of mutual interest . . .

"Say, Derry—look there! What is it? A fountain in the sea?"

Lois' voice startled him out of his reverie; and he saw what seemed a jet of silver spray that caught the sunlight, shimmered into a mist of powdered jewels and vanished like a breath on glass.

"Never seen a whale blowing off steam?" he asked, smiling at her wide-eyed wonder; and he proceeded to explain the phenomenon. It enabled him, unobtrusively, to shift his position, and led him to notice a torn petticoat frill that drooped forlornly below her skirt.

"Lois — there's your frill torn again," he said reproachfully. "I thought you'd mended it."

"I did."

"With a needle?"

"No; with pins."

"Thought so. Run and stitch it on properly — there's a good girl. I want you to make a good impression."

"Oh, Derek!" Tears sprang to her eyes. "And I've put on my prettiest things —"

"So I see. Very becoming!" He surveyed her with amused tenderness. In her wide straw hat and silky summer frock she looked pretty enough, almost, to justify the idea that he had stumbled into an imprudent marriage because his heart had run away with her. That was the best that could be made of it — to outsiders. "You look ripping," he added, quite sincerely, "but you don't seem to realize how those little untidinesses spoil the whole show. Look sharp! And for Heaven's sake, be ready in time."

Soothed by his compliment, she hurried away: and the blessed relief it was to be without her, even for ten minutes, made him feel apprehensive for the future. But then — thank goodness! there would be work to do; unfailing avenue of escape from every ill. He would pull it through, somehow: he must, for her sake and his own self-respect. In very truth he grudged her nothing he was able to give. He deferred to most of her whims; and was very patient on the whole with certain petty, yet annoying, defects that closer intimacy revealed. He honestly wanted her to be happy — to forget the haunting fear. He was prepared to do anything for her, in reason — except make passionate love to her, morning, noon, and night; and by now he had discovered that this state of things was her one idea of bliss. Unhappily for her, the very clinging nature of her devotion — and what he called her penny-novelette point of view — had the fatal effect of making him shrink farther into himself.

It was all quite in keeping with the irony of life, as he had known it from childhood. Then, the natural love he craved had been denied him. Now, when he had put his heart into other things, a love he did not crave was given him in cloying measure — the wrong kind, from the wrong person. But that was no fault of hers, poor child. And he, without lover's love at command, had done his halting best. Ever since that fatal day at Nealston, he had put behind him all futile hankering after the old life. He had not written a single letter; and the dream-feeling of detachment made things a trifle easier. He half dreaded the intrusion of Jack and his sister, who would dispel it; even while he craved the intelligent companionship of his real own kind, who would not incessantly make calls on him that he could not fulfil.

The details on the low foreshore grew clearer every moment: Victoria's noble Parliament buildings on one side, the upward sweep of the town on the other; the winding, river-like harbour thronged with craft, great and small. That child was taking her time. She would be late, to a dead certainty. She was invariably late for everything . . .

And Lois, seated on her cabin trunk, was pricking her fingers over the detestable frill — which she had twice mended with pins — and grieving that the most wonderful experience of her life was over. It had exceeded all her visions, if not her desires. Derek had been an angel to her; and yet — she felt vaguely troubled. He was odd and difficult; and — yes — in some ways, a little disappointing. But, for all that, she adored and admired him more than ever. The glamour of Jos Agar was almost as if it had never been. Yet Jos had given her what she craved — the passionate, masterful love-making that one read about in books; and she could not altogether shut out the memory of those thrilling, disturbing weeks when the spring had gone to her head; when his fierce caresses had demolished her frail scruples, and her terrifying illness had revealed, in a flash, the loveliness of life, the awful mystery of death and the nature of Jos Agar's love —

Ought she to tell Derek — everything?

She was not innately deceitful; but first she had feared he would not marry her: and now she feared his anger, the loss of his tender, protecting kindness. The sense of having done wrong troubled her hardly at all; though she was quite aware that right-minded girls did not go all lengths before marriage.

The grand ladies of Derek's world would never so involve themselves; and she shrank from shaming him by a confession of such improper behaviour. Sometimes she wondered if she were making too much of everything. Men were queer — she did not understand them. But without them there was no sense in life. And her thoughts trailed off into speculations about this 'Jack' that Derek seemed so fond of.

All these distractions so hindered her needle that, when the engine throbbed slower and slower, of course she was not ready — and Derek was seriously annoyed. But annoyance vanished at sight of Jack, resplendent in tennis flannels, awaiting them on the quay. Beside him stood the girl of the Southampton express, with the sun in her eyes and the same clear swiftness about her whole aspect, like a bird poised, ready for flight. Derek was surprised to find how distinctly the impression of

her had remained in his memory. There are certain natures that cannot hide their light under a bushel. Gabrielle de Vigne was neither very lively nor very talkative; her gaiety was of the spirit, deep down; and her light, sure touch, even on trivial things, was simply a part of her French genius for life.

Before the drive out to Silversands was half over, Lois had lost her shyness; and Derek — who had been distinctly apprehensive about ‘those women’ — felt blessedly at ease. The stretch of open country, with its English aspect, was pure refreshment after the forest-burdened mainland. And when, at length, they reached Silversands — the property of a retired naval officer — the sense of Home struck at his heart with a poignant mingling of pleasure and pain.

Here, Madame de Fontenac greeted them kindly, if a little formally. She was a slender woman with iron-grey hair, features a trifle austere in repose, and a charming smile. Her very correct English was a little stilted and she talked French to her niece.

Lois, in a bedroom with leaded casement windows and Chippendale furniture, fancied herself in fairyland: a sensation enhanced by dinner in the rose-covered veranda, with no mosquitoes and no black flies, that, on the mainland, make high summer a very doubtful joy.

And the dinner was worthy of its setting — sweet-peas in the vases, the gleam of polished glass and silver, perfect cooking, soft voices and intelligent talk. It was a long time since Derek had so enjoyed a meal. And when the men were left alone with their coffee and cigarettes, they sat silent for a spell in sheer content with the whole thing and the pleasure of being together.

Suddenly Derek raised his head and sniffed deliberately. “Seaweed!” he said; “I can smell it through all this. Lord — it’s good! Are we near the shore?”

“Quite. There’s a path at the end of the garden leads straight to the beach.”

With a slow sigh, Derek rose to his feet. “Come along then,” he said. “I feel like walking all night.”

At that moment Gabrielle reappeared. "The spectacle-case of *ma tante*, please, Jacko!" she said; then, looking from one to the other, "Are you coming in, you two?"

"No. We're off to the shore. Don't get rattled if we're latish."

Her smile had an indulgent mother-tenderness. "I'll be up," she said and left them.

Strolling through the garden, they breathed the indescribable fresh moisture of England's summer. But once they were through the lane, with the scrunch of pebbles underfoot, the dream evaporated. For there, over the water, loomed the great mainland ranges — Canada's coastal mountains and the Rockies, resplendent in the after-glow. Farther south, the Olympian snow-line, and Mount Baker, ghostly, aggressive; a landmark to ocean steamers — for miles and miles.

Hills and the sea — can earth boast a more splendid conjunction than these, the symbols of eternal steadfastness and eternal unrest? Derek — though inured to the sublimities — caught his breath and stood silent. Then he turned to Jack with a smile of grave content.

"This is great," he said quietly. "Come on!"

Thus majestically companioned, with no sound but the lazy lapping of wavelets against seaweed-covered rocks, they walked on and on; and for that one while Derek did manage — almost — to forget —

It was near eleven when they returned; and Gabrielle, who was busy writing, had a tray ready for them: yet another reminder of Home.

"Mrs. Blount seemed rather tired," she said, "so I persuaded her not to wait up for you."

"And who the dickens is Mrs. Blount?" asked Jack, screwing up his nose. "Can't we call her Lois, old man?"

"Certainly," said Derek; "she'll appreciate it."

"Good! I vote for Christian names all round. Anything else would be sheer rot."

Derek went up to bed feeling happier than he had done for

months. Jack was going to be a trump about it — he might have known. And the girl, too. Lucky devil to have a sister like that. A blessing that Lois had turned in early and would be sound asleep —

But Lois was not asleep. She had merely exchanged her dress for a kimono and was lying back in her chintz-covered chair with a novel on her lap and undried tears on her cheeks.

"Oh, Derry — I thought you were *never* coming!" she greeted him, with an aggrieved droop of her lips that he was beginning to know too well. "It was real mean of you going off like that. I hadn't any use for two strange women!"

Derek frowned. "I'm sorry," he said, without much penitence in his tone. "But if I can't leave you with them, how on earth am I to see anything of Jack?"

"Oh, of course — if you only want to get *rid* of me —"

"My dear child, *don't* be so unreasonable!" he broke in desperately.

But it was useless. The sobs she had been trying to restrain came in a sudden storm; choking her, shaking her . . .

And while he halted a moment, between vexation and pity, sobs gave place to a paroxysm of coughing. At once he was on his knees beside her. It was the most startling attack he had seen yet. There was blood on her handkerchief; and her terror at sight of it steadied him.

"Am I — dying, Derry?" she asked in a small voice when the worst was over.

"Nowhere near it, little girl," he assured her — stroking her hair that was dank with sweat; and she nestled against him with a sigh of content.

Very tenderly, if not very skilfully, he helped her into bed and bathed her forehead with eau-de-Cologne. Still she clung to him. "Stay by me, darling — I'm frightened." And after a pause: "Will you — kiss my eyes to sleep?"

It was her childish, sentimental fancy that his kiss on her lids would charm away night terrors; and because it was childish, it appealed to him. So he kissed them in turn and stayed by her till the clinging fingers fell away from his. Then he un-

dressed and slipped into his own bed, devoutly hoping she would be better in the morning.

She was not better in the morning. She awoke flushed and feverish, obviously unfit to get up. He had all a man's dislike of making a fuss in a strange house; and he went down dreading it. But Jack's amazing sister received the information without turning a hair. Derek was not to be anxious. The poor child was probably a little overdone. She would send for Dr. Clifton. And she insisted on carrying up the tray herself; while Madame de Fontenac — charmed to find that Derek could talk French — made gracious enquiries that completely set him at ease.

For all that, he felt convinced that they must clear out; and he said as much to Jack the first moment they were alone. Knowing his Jack he was prepared for a tussle; for anything, in fact, except what actually occurred.

The tussle took place in the veranda. Jack would not hear of it. Derek would hear of nothing else.

"We're obviously unsuitable as guests," he insisted, after Jack had wasted several rounds of ammunition on him. "I must take her straight back — settle her in —"

At that point Gabrielle appeared on the scene, and Jack flung a detaining arm round her shoulder.

"Gay, you darling, come and stand up for me. Dirks is the most obstinate beast in creation. He's talking rot about rushing off instanter. I've told him that's an insult and he's a blithering idiot. Kindly confirm my statements."

She proceeded to confirm them, with such patent sincerity, that Derek could no longer hold his ground.

"If you want the *real* truth, it's you two men who would be better elsewhere — for the moment. In fact, I was coming to suggest it," she added, in response to Derek's incredulous gaze. "There's nothing to be anxious about, Dr. Clifton says. A few days' rest and — *ça ira*. If you'll trust her to me —"

Derek, fearful of betraying his relief, was thankful for Jack's shout of triumph.

"There now! What did I say, you old sceptic? Gay never loves any one properly till they're ill."

"Jacko, you're superfluous!" The girl laughingly waved him aside. Then she turned to Derek.

"I've told her it's a sound prescription — that I shall be delighted —"

"You've *told* her!" he echoed, surprised out of his caution; and the smile deepened in her eyes.

"Yes. I thought as a medical suggestion it might be more acceptable. She was very sweet about it — very brave —"

"Thank you — thank you — I'll go up to her," Derek muttered, quite overcome, and plunged into the house.

Jack looked thoughtfully at the empty doorway. "Poor old Dirks!" he said. "I can't make him out. Something wrong — somewhere."

"The chief wrong," said his sister quietly, "is that — she's utterly unfit. — He ought not to have married her."

"Oh, I say — hard lines. A very stern Gay!"

"Over some things — yes." But her eyes were more indulgent than her tone. They were remarkable eyes, under brows that had the clear sweep of a bird's wing. They had tried in turn to be blue and green and brown; and had finally compromised in an iridescent mingling of all three. "Of course it's bitter hard lines; but that doesn't affect the right and wrong of it. And your Derek is evidently a man of character, which puzzles one the more. Of course — one understands the temptation. She's a sweet creature, if not very much else —"

And upstairs Derek found the 'sweet creature' propped among her pillows with a red-gold plait over each shoulder; a little languid, but surprisingly acquiescent in view of her outburst the night before. He was too thankful for the change to worry about the how or why of it.

"Are you pleased with the plan, Derry?" she asked, smiling, a wistful note in her voice.

"Well . . . I want to do whatever's best for you, little girl," he said truthfully. "You know that."

"Yes, I know that." A very small sigh escaped her. "And I'll be all right. She's just sweet to me — Miss de Vigne. She says it's my best chance — keeping very quiet. I s'pose — it wasn't — you?"

"Me? Of course not!" His astonishment rang true. "D'you think I'd run away from you because you're ill?"

"No. But . . . you might . . ." She caught his hand and pressed it against her face. "I do try an' not be a fool Lois — about things —"

"You're a very brave Lois. Miss de Vigne said so," he told her; and her eyes lightened. She dearly loved a compliment; and more than ever, after that, she loved Gabrielle de Vigne.

An hour later the two men were dismissed with Gabrielle's blessing; knapsacks on their shoulders and deep content in their hearts. Her instructions were that they should take the train to Sydney, whence they could push on, afoot, into the wilder parts of the Island. And they were not wanted back till Saturday.

Derek said little; but he could scarcely believe in his good fortune, even when they were settled opposite each other in the brisk little train, rolling through miles of fair and open country, and discussing Home telegrams that revealed a horizon dark with the threat of war. By the time they had lunched in Sydney's one hotel, and cruised among beautiful islands and had decided which one they would annex when the great moment came, Derek had shed his scepticism and basked in the sun of Jack's unblushing triumph.

Later still, when they left Sydney and plunged into the wilds, the immediate past — Australia, Canada, Lois — fell away from him. For a blessed while he recaptured the irresponsible freedom of Oxford days. All trace of languor vanished from body and brain. Simply and gratefully he took with both hands the good hour given him by the gods and Gabrielle de Vigne . . .

In the light — and dark — of after events, those three unclouded days shone in his memory like stars that the years quench not.

CHAPTER IX

*Our acts our angels are, for good or ill,
Our fatal shadows that walk by us still.*

SHAKESPEARE

AND at Silversands, Lois was doing some close thinking on her own account. Not for a moment did she doubt that Derek had gone at Gay's suggestion; neither did she doubt that he had gone willingly. Too honest to make insincere protestations, he had taken refuge in silence and affectionate generalities — not for the first time.

During their trip, she had tried to accept his odd silences as part of his general oddness — in certain things. Now she began to suspect their true nature. He still did not care 'that way'; and if she could not, by some means, make him care, there was little use in being his wife. And wives did — She had read of them in novels. She was reading one now, in which the husband was Derek; the wife, herself; and jealousy the key with which she unlocked his heart. Derek had said he was not given that way; and if she could only rouse him — what a triumph! She herself was feeling distinctly jealous of Jack; and her childish plan was to turn the tables by being a shade less accessible to Derek and particularly pleasant to his friend. She had not wit enough to perceive that she was scheming to make the whole situation ten times harder for him: so urgent was her craving for his love, for the comfortable assurance that he knew and forgave all.

So, in secret, she hugged her cherished dream; and wondered — would he perhaps come home sooner than he had said?

He did not come home sooner; in fact not till tea-time on Saturday. It had been a weary morning; the two women im-

mersed in newspapers, talking anxiously and rapidly in French. Some big trouble was looming in Europe, Lois gathered. But she asked no questions. What was Europe to her or she to Europe? Derek was coming home; and she was going to make him love her as husbands loved wives in books. She hoped the arrival of the men would check this everlasting talk about countries that, for her, were mere names on a map; though Gabrielle and her aunt — when they happened to talk English — spoke of them as if they were female relations. But Derek and Jack brought more papers and talked in the same queer, personal fashion of Russia and Belgium and France; and of Germany being "out to smash Europe" — as if Europe was a tea-set!

Derek greeted her with his friendliest smile and pressed the hand that hung nearest him. "You look awfully well," he said. "Quite a good prescription getting rid of me!"

"It wasn't through getting rid of you," she murmured reproachfully; and Jack, who was reading snatches from his paper, broke in: "Just what you said, Dirks. A gamble on the great scale. War on two fronts —"

"All the better," said Derek grimly. "She signs her death warrant. But Russia will take weeks to mobilize."

"And the notion is, while she's rubbing her eyes, Germany will just march to Paris and back —"

"*Mon Dieu, non!*" Madame de Fontenac's low voice was charged with passionate protest. "In Paris again — *les sales Boches* — *les cochons* — never! I was there in '70. A child: but — but one remembers. *Pas possible!* The good God is above; and below — there are a few French soldiers."

"Also a handful of British ones," Derek said quietly. "If our great and warlike Government permits."

"You *doubt* if England will stand by France!"

It was Gabrielle this time; her voice quiet as his own; but a gleam in her eyes made the orange flecks in them seem like sparks of fire.

"It's not England I doubt, but her present Government. I believe it will be touch and go —"

"‘Go’ for choice!” remarked the irrepressible Jack. “In that case I scoot back and clamour for a commission. I’m pretty well qualified —”

Suddenly he glanced at Derek’s face — and said no more.

To Lois their talk conveyed little or nothing; but she restrained from worrying them with questions; partly because she was not much interested, partly because she did not want to shame Derek by revealing her ignorance to his friends. Only one concrete fact emerged. Jack was going to ‘scoot back and clamour for a commission.’ But the connection escaped her. A commission had something to do with a ‘deal.’ That was all she knew about it; and her sole concern was lest Jack should ‘scoot’ before he had served her secret purpose.

After tea, when she had lured Derek into the garden, she ventured a question or two.

“Did Jack mean — is he going back to England because of all this — whatever it is?”

Derek frowned. “Yes, of course — if we fight.”

“Who is ‘we?’” she pressed him, suddenly alarmed lest he be implicated also.

“England — the British Empire that Germany is out to destroy.”

“Oh — I see.” A pause. She was as much in the dark as ever. “Would that make a lot of difference — over here?”

“A middling amount! D’you happen to realize, Lois, that you are living in the British Empire?”

She glanced at him to see if he intended a joke. “I thought I was living in Canada — B.C.,” she said.

“And you didn’t know that the two are parts of one big thing, just as your arm is a part of your body?”

She shook her head. “I’m afraid I seem — to all of you — a proper fool. But — after Father died, I didn’t get — much education —”

That pathetic confession and the break in her voice moved him to put an arm round her. “Don’t worry about that, dear,” he said, patting her shoulder his hand rested on. “I’ll teach you no end in the evenings, once we’ve settled down.

We'll all need to rub up our geography if this conflagration spreads—”

But she scarcely heeded his words. His caress, his brotherly kindness, in place of the husband's greeting she craved, let loose a flood of emotion that swept away her poor little plans for conquest —

Without a shadow of warning she flung her arms round him and kissed him passionately.

“Oh, Derek, darling,” she said, leaning her whole light weight against him. “It's real good having you home again. You *are* just a mite glad, too — aren't you?”

Derek — taken aback and genuinely stirred by her passion — could only tighten his hold and let her glean what assurance she might from that. “Don't make a scene over it, dear,” he pleaded, drawing her down to a seat screened by evergreens. “It's this kind of thing upsets you so. You're simply shaking.”

She caught her breath and drew away a little. “Yes — because . . . oh, Derry — can't you *see* — it ought to be you — not me —”

“Of course it ought,” he agreed with smothered vehemence. “That's the curse of the whole situation — for us both. At least I've been straight with you, Lois. I've never pretended —”

“I don't *want* you to pretend!” she flung in, with flaming cheeks. “But haven't you — won't you ever —”

“Oh, my dear — why torment yourself and me? I'm doing my best; and I'll go on doing it. Can't you leave it at that? Can't you see I'm worried to death about this big business at Home that dwarfs all our petty personal affairs —?”

He broke off there; for she suddenly sprang up and left him, with never a word or a backward look.

Half relieved and wholly puzzled, he sat watching her, till she vanished into the house. He was sincerely sorry if he had hurt her, but he could not feel sorry that, for once, the truth had been spoken between them. It might help to clear the air.

Then, with a great sigh, he rose and paced the far end of the lawn; to and fro, to and fro, in the hope that mechanical move-

ment might quiet the tumult in his brain. Controlled by temperament and training, it needed a strong wind to stir his deeper emotions; but to-day, in this tremendous hour of crisis, the intensity of his love for England and for Avonleigh burned with a white flame that blinded him to all lesser matters, as he had tried to make Lois understand. England *must* fight . . . ! If a temporizing Government dared withhold her, the spirits of her great dead would rise up in protest. Yes — England would fight: and he, Derek Blount — an insignificant unit among her millions of loyal sons — must remain where he was; chained hand and foot by his own act. It was the culminating stroke of Fate —

Lois, watching from her bedroom window, wondered fruitlessly what were the thoughts that goaded him to walk up and down, up and down. She had never seen him taken that way before; and it gave her, for the first time, a feeling of mother tenderness towards him. She wanted to comfort him, to ease his restlessness, as he so often eased hers. What was wrong with her that she could not make him care? Jack was her last hope.

But Jack — though friendly and charming — proved nearly as bad as the rest. His eyes had the same look of preoccupied anxiety, as day followed day, without any relief from the tension that made ordinary talk and ordinary thought a sheer impossibility.

German troops in Belgium and in France; and still no decisive word from England — ! They began to be aware that Madame de Fontenac thought a good deal more than her French politeness would allow her to say: and they chafed under the justice of those unspoken criticisms.

And Lois — isolated from them all by a chasm of ignorance — felt half bewildered, half aggrieved at this disconcerting turn of events. Even when Derek came out of the clouds and talked to her, his mind seemed half astray; and the failure of her passionate outburst withheld her from repeating that form of appeal. A world cataclysm had crushed her poor little plan. It was as if a traction engine had passed over a butterfly.

At last, one morning, she came down to breakfast more glaringly late than usual — and behold, a changed atmosphere! Even she could feel the tingle of excitement in the air.

The paper had arrived. Derek was reading out the telegrams. "That settles it — thank God!" he concluded fervently.

"Hope we go in with both feet," said Jack. "No mere naval demonstration."

"Not likely — if we get Kitchener."

"And we don't any of us realize, in the minutest degree, what it all *means*," Gay murmured, thoughtfully, stirring her tea . . .

After breakfast, the air being clearer, Lois begged Derek to explain what it did mean, so that she could understand; and he explained to the best of his power. A good deal still passed over her head; but she pounced on one concrete fact.

"Jack said he must go home at once. Has *he* got to fight?"

"Naturally — when he's been trained. The British Army's magnificent — what there is of it; but if we're to lick Germany, we'll need every available man in the Empire."

"Oh —" She had pounced on another concrete fact. "Derry — are *you* an available man?"

"No — I'm not."

"Are you — wishing it?" she ventured, very low.

"Wishing's neither here nor there," he said briskly. "Don't worry your head about that, little girl."

To his intense relief she merely gave his arm a convulsive squeeze and said no more.

Jack himself broached the subject on the veranda after dinner. The thing had to be gone through; and Derek was glad to get it over. It came after Jack had unfolded his own plans in a quiet business-like voice, assumed out of consideration for Derek, who could make none. But at the last his natural self prevailed.

"Oh, Dirks, old man," he broke out desperately, "it's the very deuce leaving you stuck out here. If we could only go into this together! Think of it!"

Derek frowned and looked straight before him into the

gathering dusk. "Thanks — I'd rather not think of it. I can't leave Lois — so that's that."

Jack considered Derek's unpromising profile. Then he remarked tentatively: "Shoals of married men will join —"

"Not with wives in her precarious state of health and no responsible belongings."

"But, Derek, she's an awfully sweet person. Couldn't you bring her home?"

"And leave her — with *whom?*" Derek could not keep the bitter note out of his voice. "She *is* — a sweet person. But picture her — with Mother — Ina — Van?"

"But — if they don't know you're married, they'll be expecting you to turn up."

"I shall write to Father, of course." A pause; then he added gruffly: "Drop it, Jacko! Stick to your own affairs. Won't your sister go with you?"

"No. She can't come yet because of her aunt. But the minute she's free she'll be off — Red Cross in France, I gather. Somehow I never seemed to realize her Frenchness till just lately. You stop on, anyway, till I'm off, Dirks. We'll go along together as far as the Fates allow."

And to that last Derek assented willingly enough.

CHAPTER X

*Life is at her grindstone set,
That she may give us edging keen,
Sting us for battle; till, as play,
The common strokes of fortune shower.*

MEREDITH

THREE weeks later, he and Lois sat at supper in the veranda of their own home. It was a still, oppressive evening, the last of August; and in Nealston there was nothing to distinguish this particular day from any other of that heroic and terrible first month of war.

Yet away on the other side of the world, in an apple orchard near Néry, a certain British battery was carrying on a preposterous duel — three guns against twelve — that will live for ever in the annals of history and romance. On this day, too, the Channel ports lay open and defenceless, awaiting the influx of German hordes — that never came.

The shadow of that dark month was on Derek's heart and in his eyes. He had almost grown to hate the superb serenity of lake and mountain that so mockingly contrasted with his inner vision of battered, pursued, undaunted flesh and blood. Only a miracle could now save Paris; and Derek foolishly supposed the age of miracles was past. His faith in things not seen — so far as it had survived the shocks of early doubt — was too nebulous to uphold him in this hour of awful uncertainty. Nor was he sustained by the optimist's innate conviction that the worst can never happen. He knew very well that the worst could happen. It might be happening even now; while he, in another hemisphere, was savouring the salmi of his talented Chinese cook. One had frankly to face the appalling fact. But where faith falters, there is the greater need of courage; and courage, like wisdom, is justified of her children.

As for Lois, she could not, in the nature of her, realize the half of what he was suffering in his dumb, lonely fashion. Unperceptive by nature, she was further blinded by the fulfilment of her twin desires — a man and a home of her own. The little house was her new toy; and she insisted that he should be interested too. He was called upon to make up her mind for her about every conceivable item, from the pattern of a curtain to the shape of a vase. In his free hours, he must take her to 'movies' — the more glaringly melodramatic the better — or follow her endlessly from shop to shop. He was infinitely patient with her vagaries; and she, by way of reward, idealized him in the very manner he could least endure. Distracted with anxiety, there was neither peace nor refreshment for him within the four walls of his home —

The place itself was pretty and pleasant enough, set well above the town that climbed the skirts of the mountain; its houses rising tier beyond tier, like the seats of an amphitheatre. He owed the discovery mainly to Mrs. Macrae. She was also responsible for their 'help'; a motherly widow-woman, without whose ministration there would have been little of comfort or tidiness in the house — and Derek appreciated both. The cook had been his own find; and he was not above admitting that the man's skill helped, considerably, to oil the wheels of things.

Soon after leaving Victoria, he had written that difficult letter to his father which told very little, yet implied much to any one who really knew him. The extenuating circumstances, he pleaded, were not altogether his own to reveal. He had done his best to give a favourable impression of Lois; had dwelt upon her youth, her precarious state, and his own conviction that, as matters stood, he could not leave her while she had need of him.

I think [he had concluded] that you will understand — though I express myself vilely — how I hate having to give you such news; and how badly it hurts not being able to go straight home and join Kitchener's Army. I've tried to write to Mother about it, but I've only succeeded in half filling the waste-paper basket. If you think she ought to know — and Van — will you please tell them whatever

you think fit. One will be misjudged on all sides — that's the curse of it. But so long as I stand square with you, I can put up with the rest. Make a few allowances — if you know how — for your 'faithful failure,' who hardly deserves the honour to be

Your loving son

DEREK BLOUNT

It had been an unspeakable relief to get that letter off his mind. He could not expect an answer for weeks; and even while he craved it, he dreaded the sting of sarcasm that his seeming folly could scarcely fail to evoke.

Meantime, there had been the strenuous business of settling Lois into her new home; and her childish delight in it all was his reward. With the incurable hopefulness of her kind, she lived from day to day: while Derek's more imaginative brain was haunted by the ghostly, inexorable shadow that mocked at her content. For himself, mere use and wont eased, a little, the sense of enchainment that still irked him badly at times. Between companioning Lois, and working on another fruit ranch, he had little leisure to call his own; and he grew genuinely fond of her — up to a point. He might have grown fonder still, but that under her sensuous softness and sweetness he found a vacuum; and the trail of the third-rate fiction she devoured was over all her thoughts and ways.

Their veranda, that was smothered in clematis and ramblers, framed incomparable visions of the higher reaches of the Lake; and Lois, in a clinging blue tea-gown and a flowered scarf, completed a domestic picture charming enough to satisfy any man whose mind was not racked with the craving to be elsewhere.

Of late she had been fretful and irritable, which was unlike her; and broken nights had laid dark smudges under her eyes. But her trouble was not purely physical. She was beginning to worry about Derek. The steady exodus of young men from the ranches and the town impressed her more than any telegrams in the paper: and now there crept into her heart a little gnawing fear that perhaps Derek really was 'available.' That

fear had been urging her to speak out and urge him to go, if he wanted to — if he ought.

She was just screwing up her courage, when he rose abruptly and went over to the end of the veranda. It was a boy with a cablegram. Derek stood silent so long that she grew nervous.

"Darling, what is it?" she asked. "Bad news?"

"Not exactly!" he said with his whimsical smile. "From my father. Family affairs." And his eyes reverted to the flimsy slip of paper in his hands.

Yours received. Deeply deplore circumstances but approve your decision.

AVONLEIGH

The idea that his father might cable had never occurred to him: and the act implied a measure of understanding, where he had expected none. It also made the task of hanging onto his job a shade less difficult.

Within a week there came a rift in the war cloud; and his doubting spirit stood rebuked. The miracle had happened: Paris had been saved. In the midst of his incredible relief, he remembered Gabrielle and Madame de Fontenac, whose faith was founded on a rock. He wondered if they were still at Silversands. Gay had written affectionately to Lois soon after they left. Since then, they had heard no more. But later on came news of Jack — who had got his cavalry commission — and a long screed from Mark; 'in it,' of course, up to the eyes.

The bewildering news of his engagement troubled Derek profoundly. Like every one else, he had taken Sheila for granted — one of the few girls he heartily admired. Yet Mark — judging from his letter — was pretty badly smitten. He wondered sometimes — had that faculty been quite left out of his composition? And he rated himself for a cold-blooded beast.

As a matter of fact, the War, with its vast and appalling possibilities, was absorbing all his capacity for emotion. England — though he criticized her and never talked patriotism — was dearer to him, as yet, than any woman. And England was fighting for her life. Derek had no illusions on that score. Though he could not rhapsodize, he could serve. He was of

those for whom work is prayer; and a perverse Fate condemned him to idleness; while his logging companions and all the lucky devils at home were, at least, doing what they could to stiffen England's sword arm. Only his innate sense of proportion steadied him, as always, in the day of trouble. England, it reminded him, could hold her own without his microscopic assistance. Still — it takes the individual to make the mass, the atom to make the sphere: and this atom could not but chafe at its exclusion from the field of honour.

He chafed still more when the thrill of pursuit was definitely checked, when Antwerp fell and the Ypres salient was born. A pencilled scrawl from the trenches told him that Mark was in the thick of things; and Jack was either going or had already gone . . .

And in the bungalow on the hill Lois coughed more persistently, saw him grow restless again, and watched the shadow of those terrible August days creep back into his eyes. He was kindness itself to her. He would take her to the pictures or for trips on the Lake; he read her decent literature in the evenings. But all the while she knew that his mind and heart were miles away — on the blood-drenched battle-fields of Flanders. Yet she could not bear to let him go. Again and again she tried tactlessly, unskilfully — to say what she felt, to discover what he really thought about it; and always he laughed it off or changed the subject.

But there came a day when, in spite of him, she fatally insisted on pressing the point.

It was in the evening. Too cold for the veranda now; and she lay in her long chair near a glowing fire. Derek sat beside her with a book. He did not know she was watching him; and he remained unnaturally still for a long time, without turning a page. She saw that his spirit had slipped away. Only the shell of him sat there in her pretty drawing-room, because the shell of him was obliged to stay and take care of her. Was he pining to go — hating her because she held him? Last time, when she talked of being a millstone, he had got quite cross,

but to-night she felt keyed up even to a transient mood of heroism. Her true motive, though she knew it not, was simply to stand higher in his esteem, to prove herself not all unworthy.

"Derek," she asked suddenly, "what *are* you thinking about so hard?"

He started and looked round.

"The one eternal subject," he said truthfully. "What else?"

She sighed. "It's a shame you should be saddled with a wife who's just a millstone —"

"Millstone? Nonsense! A featherweight like you —!"

But to-night she was inexorable. "Not a mite of use to joke it off, Derry. It's *true*. And there's times — when you sit so quiet — all lost . . . I can't help but wonder are you wishing — I wasn't there?"

That unexpected question fairly took his breath away. "My dear Lois — you're the limit. Nice sort of husband you make me out. You ought to know me better by now —"

"Oh, Derry, I do — But all the time I can *feel* that horrid war tugging you away from me. If there wasn't me . . . you'd be off to-morrow — wouldn't you?"

The tragedy of it, and the tactless futility of her persistence, smote him silent.

"There — you *see!*" Her plaintive voice trailed on, taking silence for assent. "And if you really did ought to go, it makes *me* get wishing — almost — I wasn't here —"

At that he leaned forward, took her gently by the shoulders, and looked so straight into her eyes that the blood surged up to the hollows of her temples.

"See here, little girl — if you weren't ill, I'd slang you without mercy. Please understand, once for all, that *you're* my job, first and foremost: and if I'm not kicking, there's no call for you to make fancy difficulties. So don't let me hear you talk like *that* again —"

"But, Derry —"

"Oh, let *be*, for God's sake. — Does a woman never know when to stop?" But she looked so fragile, as the flush ebbed

from her face, that he added in a changed voice: "Now — kiss and be a good little wife; and I'll carry you to bed."

Without a word she lifted her face and they kissed mutually. Then he carried her to bed.

Next day she was subdued, but smiling; a little withdrawn into herself. And on the Wednesday — returning from work later than usual — he found an empty house. Good Mrs. O'Rane's round face was as long as a fiddle.

"What's the matter? Where's Mrs. Blount?" he asked sharply; and she flung up her hands.

"The dear knows. Ye'd scarce bin gone an hour when she went out o' that door, and niver a sight of her since — the saints preserve her!"

Derek had a strange sensation, as if his heart slowly rose up and turned over within him; but his face gave no sign.

"Did she say where she was going?" he asked, in a voice so contained that his 'help' ejaculated mentally: "The stony-hearted they are — these English!"

Aloud she said: "'Just a thrifle of shopping an' a walk,' says she. Her that's bought all a woman can be wanting, an' more, not to mention she had a bit of a tempershaw —"

Derek had turned on his heel and was leaving the house; but she called after him on a high note of lamentation: "Dear, oh, *dear*, sir, there's chops and tatties just spoiling for you."

"Eat them yourself," he flung back. But she would not have it; and sooner than argue he bolted the food without tasting it. Then he set out on his desperate errand, with even less of a clue to guide him than on that strange, unforgettable night of June . . .

Wild possibilities lurked at the back of his brain; but he clung to common sense, till all likely coverts had been beaten without avail; — her favourite shops, the houses of her few friends. Then fear came upon him, and he rang up Beulah Ranch. No news of her there; and though Mrs. Macrae spoke hopefully, her tone belied her words.

"Shall I come over to you by the evening boat?" she concluded. "Or will I only be in the way?"

"Rather not. You'd be the greatest blessing in life. — I must be off now and report to the police. So long."

The head of the local police force was a large and very human person; and his business-like enquiries were tinged with discreet sympathy. Derek listened gratefully to assurances that searchers would be sent out in all directions and they would ring him up the moment they had anything to report.

After that there was no more to be done; but, goaded by sheer restlessness, he tramped the road above the Lake for a distance far beyond his wife's powers of walking. Then he sat down on a rock — and wild possibilities rushed in and mocked him . . .

At one moment he felt half angry with her; and the next his heart contracted at thought of her alone and frightened, or hurt. For months he had so tenderly guarded her that she seldom went out by herself: and now — goodness knew what folly her cheap instinct for the theatrical might have prompted her to attempt! Was ever woman born at once so aggravating and so irresistibly pathetic? If a second edition existed, he had no desire to encounter it.

It was late when he reached home, tired and worried, to find that a cable had arrived in his absence.

He tore it open hurriedly and read:

Mark wounded and missing. Feared killed. Taking car Belgium.
Will report result. MACNAIR

Twice over he scanned the hateful message; then he sat very still, realizing it all . . .

Dearly though he loved Jack, Mark was the true comrade of his spirit; without him, the salt of life would lose half its savour. He was so vividly, commandingly alive that Derek could not believe in his extinction. But even so — there were endless awful possibilities . . .

Into the midst of these came Wei Sing's gentle reminder that the soup was getting cold. Then he roused himself and remembered Lois — also Mrs. Macrae, who ought to be here by now.

The sound of hoofs reassured him, and as he stepped into the veranda she came riding up the path — a queer, semi-masculine figure in her dungaree divided skirt and felt hat. Like most of her kind, she rode astride, and could vault into a saddle or out of it as easily as a man.

"There you are, thank God!" was Derek's greeting; and while he unstrapped her bundle, she sprang to the ground.

"No news?" she asked.

He shook his head. "Only this — from Home — my best friend."

He handed her the telegram; and when she looked up there were tears in her eyes. "Poor Derry! My poor boy —"

Derek said nothing. He could not trust himself. But he loved her, at that moment, as he loved Lady Forsyth; and for the same quality. Unmothered as he was, the mother-need was strong in him still. Some men, no matter how self-reliant, never lose it altogether.

At dinner they talked only of Lois. Things began to look serious and Mrs. Macrae did not conceal her anxiety.

"Had she bin worried any?" was her first question; and Derek explained, adding that he believed he had dispelled all that. But Mrs. Macrae looked doubtful. She had not much opinion of a man's skill in dispelling feminine fancies. "Women in her state get queer notions — do queer things," she said, with a significant look; and seemed on the verge of some confidential remark, but evidently thought better of it.

After dinner they rang up the police — without result. Then they paced the veranda, guessing, speculating, talking in jerks, till Mrs. Macrae, in her wisdom, insisted that he should go to bed.

"What's the damn use?" he asked, half angrily. "D'you suppose I can sleep?"

"You can lie flat, anyways," she said gently. "Reckon you've been rampaging around all day; and it may be the same to-morrow. So where's the sense of getting tucked up an' wasting shoe leather half the night? You git flat an' give yourself a chance."

Sooner than argue, he obeyed. Anxiety is exhausting; and to anxiety was added the strain of conflicting sensations that he was doing his loyal best to ignore . . .

"Not now — not this way," was the honest hope of his heart. When her moment came, he must be with her, if only to ease her fears. Strange how she haunted him — her listless movements and plaintive voice and the red-gold glory of her hair. They had not been four months married; and their brief union had been in no sense intimate; but because she had loved truly, up to her lights, the impress she left upon his heart was genuine, if not deep. Now — lost and strayed — she was no longer the wife who so often worried him, but the frightened child, whose pitiful appeal it was not in him to resist. She was small. She was futile. Her capacity for love was mainly a blend of passion and sentiment; but it was not altogether base metal. She had lately given proof of that. It was, he began to realize, the one lever that might conceivably lift her above herself. It might even give her the courage she had once lacked —

In his heart he prayed it had done no such thing. But where on earth was he to look for her now —?

Towards morning Nature had her way at last; and he fell sound asleep.

No news at the police office next day; and Mrs. Macrae was obliged, reluctantly, to return home — if only for the moment.

"What'll you do now?" she asked at parting.

"Go on hunting till I drop," he answered doggedly; and went back to the house to think things out.

There, on the dining-room table, a telegraphic envelope lay awaiting him. As he snatched it up, all the sensations of yesterday surged through him: — and when he opened it, anti-climax was complete.

It came from a hotel in Victoria, and it ran:

I was going right off to give you a chance, but Gay has left here,
so no use. I am ill. Please come. So sorry. Lois

In the confusion of his mixed emotions, relief predominated — relief tinged with vexation: but vexation was shamed at thought of all she had risked in her genuine, if futile, attempt to clear the way for him. So like Lois — not even to find out if they were there. And he himself had never once thought of the railway station! He would not have given her credit for so bold a stroke. But now, at all events, there was something definite to be done.

CHAPTER XI

For she loved much . . .

ST. LUKE VII, 47

HE found her almost in a state of collapse. She wept and clung to him and implored his forgiveness; and he, remembering the thought of his heart, kissed her with a fervour that surprised and uplifted her. Then he scolded her sternly for her own good. The scolding passed clean over her head; but the treasured memory of that kiss, given when she least deserved it, atoned for all she had been through. She was scarce fit to travel; and the return journey was an ordeal Derek would not soon forget. Only by a miracle did he get her home in time.

For more than a week she hung between life and death. For more than a week life itself was a mere appendage to illness — doctor and nurses, and Lois talking fitfully in a voice that was not her own. Once he heard her speak of Jos, whose existence he had almost forgotten in the stress of recent events.

And while invisible forces wrestled for possession of her fragile body, he worked full time at the Ranch. For he had need of regular occupation to ease his distraction of mind. He felt, in a measure, responsible for her sufferings; and it hurt him keenly. There was also the ache of anxiety about Mark: and the subconscious knowledge that her death would mean freedom to spend himself for England, his greater love . . .

But, as that strange hushed week drew to an end, it began to look as if she would weather the storm.

The doctor had spoken more hopefully that morning; and in the evening when Derek returned, the day-nurse told him that the patient had fallen into a deep natural sleep. If that sleep lasted — all might yet be well. Mrs. Macrae was in the sick-room. She would come and see him later on.

Derek thanked her formally and passed into his little book-filled study, where he found mail letters: Jack, Mark — he would not have believed the sight of Mark's writing could ever give him pain — and the long-delayed letter from his father.

He tore it open hastily, prepared for the worst. Lord Avonleigh wrote:

MY DEAR BOY,—

It was lucky I wired, as my promised letter was held up by a bout of fever and a touch of internal inflammation. Nothing to make a long tale about. I would not let Aunt Marion worry you needlessly. Your present position must be quite sufficiently distracting. I hope the wire eased your mind somewhat. But I frankly confess your news was a shock to us both. A mere scrape of the average variety would have been less disquieting. But on reflection I have the grace to be thankful it is otherwise. I am glad you mentioned her age. It puts a good many disagreeable suppositions out of court. And I venture to hope she is attractive. It may ease things for you.

You are right about Mother. If explanatory facts were piled as high as Nelson's Column, she could neither understand nor condone such a flagrant departure from the normal. I am telling her and Van that you are keen to join the Army, but you are unfortunately tied up and will be coming home the moment you are free. I gather Van is also keen — and also tied up. It is a pity. I would like one of you, if not both, to be doing your duty in that line — and I felt quite sure of you. — [“Didn't he feel sure of Van?” Derek reflected, not a little taken aback.] But we both feel you are doing right in the sad circumstances. And you have our united sympathy, though it is tempered with disapproval! Write again soon. Marion ties me down to a short letter, so I must keep clear of the War, which is going to be a bigger business than most of them suppose. God bless you. Take care of yourself.

Your loving father

AVONLEIGH

The whole tone of the letter was kinder, more understanding, than he had dared to hope for; and the different ending — he very well knew — was no mere formula. He seemed only to be discovering his father now that half the world lay between them. Why had they missed each other so hopelessly through-

out the years of his boyhood? If they could but meet and talk over all this! Some day — perhaps —?

He started. It was Mrs. Macrae at the door.

"Derry — can I come 'long in?"

"Yes, of course." He rose and proffered his chair. She accepted it and looked up at him where he stood near the stove, holding his hands over the warmth.

"I'm tired, some," she sighed — and then smiled. "A good sign that. No time to feel tired till you know you're through the wood."

"Is Lois — through the wood?" Derek asked quietly.

She nodded. "I reckon so. Sleeping like a babe new born."

"Thank God for that."

"So pretty she looks. You did ought to see her."

"May I — when?"

"Presently. Quiet as a mouse!"

He let out a deep breath and was silent, warming his hands. Twice she gave him a significant look. Then she ventured to speak her thought.

"Say, Derry — I s'pose you know there was more to it than her lungs?"

His mute, bewildered gaze assured her he knew nothing of the sort. "And didn't Lois know it, neither?" she demanded of his silence.

He looked uncomfortable. "I — really — she never said so to me."

"My! You *are* a sweet pair of innocents! Well — there's an end to it now. An' best so, maybe."

Again she paused and looked up at him, thinking what a fine manly face he had and how tired he looked; wondering did he guess at all, about Jos Agar? It was she who ought to have seen earlier how things were going: and she blamed herself more than Lois — or even Jos. For she knew, now, what the nurses — thank Heaven — could not know, that Jos was responsible for all they had just been through. If Derek did not know, he ought to be told: and she found the telling unexpectedly difficult. Plain-spoken though she was, she had her

reticences. And she was fond of Derek: fonder than ever, these days. He was so plainly a gentleman all through: she could not bear to shock or hurt his finer feelings.

Presumably he agreed with her last remark: but he said nothing. In respect of confidences or intimate talk, one had to go all the way with Derek Blount.

"Say, Derry," she plunged at last. "Did you never get thinking how far things might have gone between her an' Jos Agar?"

"Agar?" He frowned sharply, and she saw the question startled him.

"That was my meaning when I said — best so. An' — she never let on?"

He shook his head. "Probably she was afraid — poor child. I've found her straight in other ways."

"An' you didn't never suspect?" she pressed him, the ice being broken.

"N-no. Well" — he corrected himself — "fact is . . . I did think about it — before . . . in the spring. I wondered you weren't more strict with her. But — since we married, I haven't given it a thought."

It was her turn to be surprised now. "You wondered about it — *before*? And yet — you married her! Though it's plain to see, you aren't gone on her — never have been!"

Derek winced. "Is it so plain?" he asked, evading the point.

"'Tis to me, anyways; though I thought different — once. When you might have had her, you held off; and when there was good excuse for any man letting her go, you nipped in an' married her. I never *could* make head or tail of it."

"And — you never will," he said, very quietly. "It's our own affair, and I'd rather not talk of it, if you don't mind. Have you said anything to Lois?"

"Sakes, no! She's bin in no state for talk."

"Well, if she doesn't realize things — let her be. I won't have her worrying on my account. She's done too much of that already."

Again Mrs. Macrae looked at him steadily, pondering.

Then: "I knew right away you was the straight goods, Derek," she said with her large smile. "But I never reckoned you was as straight an' simple-hearted as that amounts to. Guess she's bin in luck, has Lois —"

"Oh, dry up, please," he said, in a pained voice. "I've done what I could for her — which was little enough. And now — she's half killed herself for my benefit."

Mrs. Macrae nodded and rose from her chair. "You've acted like a man an' you can bet she knew it. But I must be getting back now case she might wake. You look in later."

When she had gone, Derek sat down and opened Mark's letter. He had scarcely finished reading it when Mrs. Macrae was back at the door. This time she entered without ceremony: her news in her startled eyes.

"Derek — she's gone — as quiet as quiet. Just slipped away in her sleep."

Derek said nothing: but the dazed look of pain in his eyes went to her motherly heart.

"Will you come, my dear? No fear we'll disturb her now. After all — so best, poor lamb!"

He had not thought her strong voice could achieve so soft a tone. It vibrated through him, almost upsetting his control. But he rose and followed her without a word. On the threshold she glanced at his face that was set and strained: then slipped away and left them alone.

Lois lay like a child asleep, one cheek resting on the pillow, one thick red-gold plait over her shoulder; her still face delicately tinted like a waxen transparency. It seemed to him incredible that she would never wake again. And the irony, that had tinged their whole brief relation, persisted even to the end. For Lois, dead, stirred him, moved him, more profoundly than Lois alive had ever done, for all her clinging devotion.

His own words came back to him: "She's half killed herself for my benefit." They fell short of the truth. This one thing, in her short aimless life, she had done thoroughly: and it was

done for him. But that he knew she had simply forestalled the inevitable, he could scarce have endured the thought.

Suddenly, while he stood there, her voice sounded somewhere in his brain: "Kiss my eyes to sleep, Derry." Stooping he kissed them each in turn, that her last sleep might be unaffrighted with dreams. His own eyes were heavy with tears; and one of them fell on her forehead. Very gently he wiped it away. Then he laid his hand upon her bright hair; held it there a moment in a silent benediction — and went out —

Mrs. Macrae stayed with him till everything was over: and he was thankful exceedingly for her presence to ease his very real sense of loss. For all her blunt, outspoken ways, her touch never jarred: and she mothered him, in his dazed and silent distress, as his own mother had never done in all her days.

For nearly four months, his life had moved in a restricted circle with Lois for its central point: her health, her fancies, her insistent need of him. Only now that she was gone did he realize how complete that concentration had been; and the readjustment of heart and brain took time. He begged Mrs. Macrae to do whatever she pleased with the furniture and all the pretty, useless trifles in which Lois had taken such delight. The mere sight of them hurt him more than he could have believed . . .

Their brief sojourn together, in the valley of the shadow, was an experience neither would easily forget; and, in the course of it, their latent friendship blossomed into an abiding reality.

Gradually, completely, Derek's whole nature righted itself. Old allegiances claimed him. He was his own man again —

Early in December came news from Lady Forsyth that Mark had been restored to them — wounded and broken, but alive: and it needed only that to arouse him altogether. Straightway he cabled to his father:

Free to join up. Propose returning by Japan and Bombay if you approve.

And very soon the answer sped back to him:

Delighted to see you — AVONLEIGH.

A week later he stood, at last, on the deck of an ocean liner watching, with very mixed emotions, the ghostly glory of Mount Baker gleam and grow misty and fade into nothingness, like the vision of a dream. . . .

END OF BOOK THREE

BOOK IV
SMOKE AND FLAME



BOOK IV SMOKE AND FLAME

CHAPTER I

Occasions do not make a man frail, they show what he is.

THOMAS A KEMPIS

To the Honourable Evan Trevanyon Blount, of Avonleigh Hall, War with a 'great and friendly nation' — War that had been written down a financial impossibility — had proved a somewhat disconcerting event. Consequently, he had been slow to face the full significance and proportions of a struggle that had shattered his most comforting beliefs; and, incidentally, a good many other things that could not be so easily mended.

Even after eight and a half months of Homeric fighting — of muddle and heroism and startling revelations of German psychology — his official atmosphere was scarcely changed, and he himself had shed little of his old faith. Not that he was a miracle of constancy in believing; but that he was fain to extract every ounce of comfort from an admittedly disquieting situation. By every financial canon, Germany should have reached her last ounce of credit months ago. The spring offensive — lyrically heralded by newspaper poets — should have rolled her armies back to the Rhine. Neither of these things had happened, and Van had an unpleasant sensation of having been 'let down.'

The British Army, it seemed, was short of guns and explosives and a few other trifles essential to victory. But one began to discover that the human element — the mere officers and men — possessed amazing grit, by virtue of which they had achieved the impossible and could, apparently, be trusted to keep on achieving it, as and when required.

Upheld by this comforting discovery, Van had uncomplainingly endured the trials of that first winter of War. For the sake of his own digestion and his mother's peace of mind, he had cultivated a serenely detached optimism. He had disbelieved, on principle, all 'scare' mongering, and throughout those early bewildering days — when the talk was of no rifles and no food, of invasion and revolution — he had kept his head and laid in a goodly store of his own particular needs. Nor had he been 'rushed' into parting with his immaculate Bavarian valet. The good fellow had protested loyal devotion, and had been smilingly advised to 'go Swiss for the duration of the War.'

Even his tentative idea of joining the Army had been effectually dispelled by a heart-to-heart talk with his Chief, who condensed his view of the country's needs into one pithy phrase: "Brawn for the Flanders front. Brains for the Home front." On this particular occasion, he added conclusively: "*You* know all the ropes, Blount, and the work's more complex these days. I can't spare you — that's flat!" And Van had dutifully resigned himself to the situation.

Only in one respect had he really been hard hit. His few, spasmodic investments were chiefly in German concerns. His father's repeated warnings that the two countries were potential, if not actual, enemies had been countered with airy chaff about the 'militarist microbe,' and well-grounded assertions that nothing could shake the commercial foundations of Germany.

He did not, now, find it convenient to remember all the irrefutable, second-hand arguments he had launched on the subject of international finance in relation to modern war. No doubt there were scores of cleverer men in the same boat; a reflection that soothed his vanity, if it failed to readjust his bank account. And he had felt the loss keenly. For in addition to his personal outlay at Avonleigh House, there was the well-appointed suite at the Albany. There were theatres, and little dinners. There were billiard matches and week-ends, and a few other costly items indispensable to his full enjoyment of life. So dividends came in handy — and they were no more.

To his relief, Lord Avonleigh had tactfully refrained from enquiring after the health of his investments; and Van had not spoken of the matter to any one, except to his friend Karl Schonberg and — oddly enough — Karl's father.

In the course of 1913 he had seen a good deal of the elder Schonberg, who now rented a house in Mayfair and kept an interested eye on Karl's work at Avonleigh. His friendly advances had not been discouraged by Van, who endorsed the cynical axiom of his own world, 'Go where money is.' Schonberg kept a good table and gave his guests sound wine. As a raconteur he could hold his own with the best; and he had a rare repertoire of piquant tales about well-known people up his sleeve. The spiciest of these were reserved for the select few; and to those alone he revealed a tithe of his uncanny intimacy with the vast, complex world of finance. He knew the alphabet of the Stock Exchange from A to Z. A tip from Schonberg was a mark of favour worth having; and it followed that Van had very soon said in his heart: "This is a man to be cultivated. Why did Karl never let on?"

From that time the cultivating process had gone steadily forward to their mutual satisfaction. Whether that sensation would have been shared by Lord Avonleigh was a question so doubtful that Van, in his letters to Bombay, considerately refrained from more than casual allusions to Karl's father. He inclined to greater freedom with his mother; but she had developed a nervous dread of anything with a German name, from a new-born infant upwards. Van had several friends thus alarmingly inflicted, and only her implicit faith in him persuaded her that those few must be all his fancy painted them. For these, and other cogent reasons, the Schonberg intimacy belonged to that private and personal region of his life which concerned no one except himself — or so he fondly supposed.

But Adolf Schonberg was a light not easily hidden under a bushel — unless the bushel happened to serve his own ends. With his appearance in town, he stood revealed to a large circle of business friends as a more potent influence in the region of

politics and finance than he had hitherto allowed them to suspect. His name figured prominently on subscription lists, Relief Funds, the personnel of War Committees; and it was in pursuance of these commendable activities that he had hit upon the happy idea of financing a hospital for wounded officers, could he but secure the loan of a large country house in healthy and beautiful surroundings: briefly, Avonleigh Hall. The place had been let to a friend of his for the summer of 1913. It was now unoccupied. Refusal, in the circumstances, would not look well; and few men of his acquaintance were more sensitive to appearances or more amenable to diplomatic pressure than young Evan Blount. A *tête-à-tête* dinner, Pol Roger, vintage port and liqueur brandy, were allies whose virtue he had proven a score of times — and they did not fail him now.

Van — when he had got over his initial astonishment — took kindly to the idea. Since he was not fighting and had no spare cash to squander on Relief Funds, an Avonleigh Hospital seemed a good move: the more so that this amazingly large-hearted German — naturalized, of course — was ready to take all the trouble and most of the expense off his hands. He was only restrained from settling matters outright by the knowledge that neither of his parents would approve the scheme in its actual form. He needed time to devise a version of it nearer to their liking. So he had temporized pleasantly and begged leave to think things over.

That little dinner had taken place on a certain Monday evening of early April, 1915; and on the Friday afternoon Van sat alone in the drawing-room of his bachelor suite, presumably thinking things over, while he sipped his afternoon coffee and skimmed the columns of an "Early War Edition." Even in these anxious days, he was not among those for whom newspaper reading became a form of dram-drinking. He had no enthusiasm for the heroics, no appetite for the horrors of war: but he had enough imagination to be made very uncomfortable by sanguinary details, gloomy forecasts and sweeping assumptions that every one in authority was doing the wrong thing on prin-

ciple. The simplest way to avoid such futile discomfort was to patronize the optimistic press and avoid "War talk" like the plague; the which he conscientiously did. This hospital business, of course, would bring him up against wounded men; but it would be as well to have his name connected with something of the kind. In fact, his mind was made up — or, more accurately, his version was made up to suit the prejudices of his people.

He had lunched at Avonleigh House and propounded the plan, casually, to his mother and Ina and George, on whom he had left a distinct impression that the idea was his own. He had been applauded for his patriotic impulse: though Lady Avonleigh, on second thoughts, had jibbed a little at the idea of giving up her foothold in the country. Things were still so insecure. London might be invaded. When winter came, those awful noiseless Zeppelins, people talked about, might come over in battalions and rain fire from heaven. Avonleigh was, so to speak, her fire escape.

Ina had proffered her own little place as a substitute. It was quite 'the smart thing'; and Van must not be choked off, when he *did* happen to sprout an idea. She would go down herself to cheer up the officers. And of course they must have a Committee. She was All at Committees —

A groan from George confirmed that last. "Between War Babies and War Committees, G. F. Junior hasn't a dog's chance."

"G. F. Junior can assert himself quite as effectively as G. F. Senior," Ina had retorted with playful sharpness. "As for Committees — you legal men can't talk. Nothing you love better — so long as they don't commit! Look at your leading lights, trying to run a super-German War on the non-committal touch!"

"Ina's always neatest when she's nastiest," Van reflected, smiling at the remembrance. He had enjoyed the little passage of arms — not uncommon between those two; but on the whole he had been mildly bored. And this evening he anticipated further boredom in a pleasanter form. For his guest in chief

was a certain Miss Cynthia Doreen, to whom he contemplated offering his name and prospective title — one of these days. Personally, he was in no hurry to "domesticate the Recording Angel." Women were delightful: but he liked variety, and preferred them unattached. The deuce of it was they would not let him be; and he was susceptible — up to a point.

Miss Doreen — the candidate of the moment — was an Irish-American heiress. Under the very select wing of the Lady Agatha Hamerton she had made something of a stir among society bachelors with titles to offer in exchange for gold; and many had rushed in to their undoing. Van, cooler and more wary, had been discreetly favoured: when, lo, into the midst of his leisurely courtship there crashed a European War. But Miss Doreen had not joined in the scramble to cross the Atlantic. She had preferred to stay on with Lady Agatha, freely spending herself and her money in the Allied cause.

They were dining to-night in Van's rooms, with Karl to make a square. After dinner there would be a discreet theatre, and after the theatre, a more or less discreet supper at the Carlton. Not near such good fun as last night's little lark; when Karl had put in just enough champagne to be really entertaining; and he had driven home with Léonie Lemaure in her most provocative, most enchanting mood. There were indiscreet moments when he was guilty — almost — of wishing he could cut the conventions and marry her outright. There was something about her — more than mere physical witchery. English to the marrow, he was yet fain to admit that a Frenchwoman, high or low, had a sheer gift for life rarely found in the women of his own race; and if this one could not become mistress of Avonleigh, she reigned unchallenged in her own sphere — a natural-born mistress of men —

At this point Van emptied his coffee-cup, lit a fresh cigarette and wondered what the deuce had become of old Karl, who had gone off to lunch with Schonberg. He could hardly have been jawing with him all this time. He was a secretive beggar in some ways, was Karl; and their closer relation had not, for some indefinite reason, led to closer intimacy. They

seemed content now-a-days to skim the surface of things. Van supposed it was the common fate of all youthful friendships. The queer thing was that while he grew intimate with the father, he grew less intimate with the son; and this inverted process had culminated in Karl's attitude to the hospital scheme. Instead of being keen, he seemed lukewarm; even inclined to deprecate hasty decision. And Van, completely puzzled, had suffered a tweak of doubt; not as to Karl's loyalty, but as to his sentiments. Certainly, at the start, he had spoken of joining the Army: but when Van flatly refused to let him go, he had admitted that men like himself, linked with both combatants, were in a rather awkward position whatever their sympathies might be. Since then they had tacitly avoided the subject; and only when Van was most aware of constraint between them would the awkward question arise — Had Karl found himself, after all, more attached to the Fatherland he so stoutly criticized than he cared to admit?

It was such a confoundedly unpleasant supposition that Van relegated it to the rubbish heap of other unpleasantnesses at the back of his mind. Still, intermittently, it bothered him —

Ah, there he was at last!

He entered simultaneously with the post: a couple of bills and an envelope in Derek's handwriting. The fact that it bore an English stamp distracted Van's attention from the worried look in Karl's light eyes. The last he had heard of his brother was from Bombay.

"Dirks in England again!" he exclaimed. "Good business. Sit down, old man, and help yourself now you *have* turned up." And as Karl obeyed, he opened his letter. "Salisbury Plain! He's joined up instanter, without so much as reporting himself to his family, after two and a half years' absence. Dirks all over! Short and sweet. Care to hear?"

Karl nodded.

DEAR OLD VAN, — This is to announce that I really am home again. Fixed up in khaki (though it happens to be emergency blue), and hoping this finds you in the pink as it leaves me at present! I

got a week-end pass on joining, so I propose to come and see you all. I've written to Mother and told her to wire if she's very much engaged, in which case I would go to Wynchcombe Friars. I long for a sight of you all and a whiff of Town; so I hope you're not up to the eyes in important engagements. I shall reach Waterloo 12.10, and with all due respects, I have the honour to be,

Your obedient servant,
DEREK BLOUNT, Pte. No. 5936.

Van sat silent a moment studying a small bronze by Rodin, for which he had paid a very long price. He was thinking of old days. In his unemotional fashion, he cared a good deal more for Derek than that obstinate sceptic could ever bring himself to believe.

"He's the right sort," Karl remarked quietly. "Goes straight ahead. No palaver."

"No. He's got his failings, but there's not much wind-baggery about old Dirks. Still — he might as well have gone for a commission. Sheer perversity — acting the ruddy democrat, when he's nothing of the kind. Mother can have him for lunch. Then I'll trot him round. Square dinner at the Carlton — what? You and your father!"

"Wouldn't he rather meet some one else? I like Derek, but I never thought he cared much about me. And he doesn't know my father."

"Well, he's going to remedy that defect in his education. Great sport! — You seem to have had a top-hole lunch party. Couldn't drag yourself away."

"Quite the reverse. I left early and went on to some music."

"Well, you might have rung me up."

"It wouldn't have amused you. All classical. I had a Homeric thirst on for the real thing."

But Van cared nothing for Karl's Homeric thirst.

"Did your father mention the great scheme?" he asked.

"He talked of precious little else."

"Glad he's keen. Wish I could say the same of you. A big house like that ought to be utilized — what?"

"Of course it ought. But I happen to have my hands full with my own job. The other's your affair."

Van looked hard at his friend, pensively twirling a superfluous eyeglass that he had affected of late. "You *are* a queer beggar, Karl," he said, smiling. "Come along and buzz round till it's time to do the polite again."

And they went out together.

CHAPTER II

There is no philosophy more irritating than that of a brother.

JOHN GALSWORTHY

AT half-past twelve next morning, Lady Avonleigh sat alone in her spacious double drawing-room. She was moved beyond her wont by Derek's return, and his immediate absorption into that terrible War: and because she felt shy of her motherly emotion, she had arranged for a quiet talk with 'dear Derek' before the others arrived. She liked to stage-manage these little events so as to avoid undue commotion. Her heart and nerves were shaken more than ever in these unsettling days. So Van was to meet Derek at Waterloo and send him on alone; and none of them were to turn up till one o'clock.

When the door opened she rose with a little flutter of anticipation — and behold, a stranger! Not the rather clumsy boy of Oxford vacation days, but a lean, muscular man in blue uniform and puttees; his sunburnt face more personable than she remembered it; and in his eyes such a vivid look of his father that her heart beat quicker and her neat little speech of welcome failed to come off.

They simply smiled at each other. Then Derek came quickly forward, flung his arms round her and kissed her with quiet fervour — once, and then again. . . .

Quite another being, this stranger son — ! And the change, if distinctly disturbing, was also distinctly pleasant. Since her parting with Evan, no one had shown her such genuine affection: and she appreciated affection, though she had small skill in response.

Derek, himself, aware of her emotion, had a sudden flash of hope that perhaps he had found her also, through going to the ends of the earth; and he allowed one arm to remain round her

shoulder while she stroked the other, murmuring: "Dear Derek — dear boy! Such a relief to feel you are back safe. Out there — one never knew what might be happening to you. And you never really told me in your letters — you're as bad as Father! And you know — you've grown so like him!"

"Glad to hear it," Derek said heartily, and she smiled.

"It was a charming plan your having that little time together. So disappointing that Van and I could not go. How is he looking, dear? He said his illness was nothing. But one can never tell."

"He's better, anyway. Looks tired, though — and older. It's a beastly climate and he overworks."

She sighed. "I *wish* he could come home. And I wish — don't scold me! — that you weren't rushing off again at once."

"I'll probably get the summer at home. It *does* come hard — on the women —"

"Yes. But still — it's quite the right thing; and — you look very nice." She stood back a little, surveying him. "Naturally, I'd rather you had waited for a commission. Much more suitable."

"I'm not so sure. *I* prefer it this way."

She shook her head at him. "It's just a kink in you. I believe, if you could manage it, you'd prefer walking on your hands, simply because other people walk on their feet."

It was the first whiff of misunderstanding — and it hurt.

"No, Mother, it's not that," he said with a touch of constraint. "Anyway — Father approves. — Hullo! what's this?"

He picked up a photo of a yearling babe.

"My grandson!" she said with a faint note of pride; and they talked of Ina and her marriage, and trivial things; and the little thrill of *rapprochement* had subsided before the others arrived.

Ina greeted him with what Van called her sisterly peck; and a no less sisterly remark that seeing Derek look smart was quite 'one of the events of the War.'

It was a family lunch; besides themselves and George, only General Sir Vyvian Blount, from the War Office: and Derek was the centre of interest. He wondered whether they felt —

as he did — the strangeness of that simple fact. What did he think of this? What was his impression of that? How did London strike him? Did she look like a city at war? He confessed that he had hoped to see her looking more like it than she did.

"But London isn't at war — yet," he added decidedly. "And till she is, we shall never get a real move on."

Ina — a devout Londoner — at once sprang to arms. "My good idiot, London is as much at war as you are. We're simply humming with activities. You've only seen the surface."

"Haven't had time to see much more," he retorted good-humouredly. "But you asked what I thought. And you have to reckon with outside impressions. I should say everything counts — in war."

General Blount bestowed an approving glance on the nephew he scarcely knew. With here a question and there a comment, he drew the boy on to speak his mind — modestly, but decisively, and even critically — on the one engrossing topic of the hour. By reason of his very love for England, Derek was the more sensitive to those defects of her qualities that make her, as an enemy, too casual, too tolerant, except when pressed to extremities — her back against the wall. It was an attitude both Van and his mother could be trusted to misunderstand. In their view, the love of country, or of family, that could frankly recognize failings was tantamount to disloyalty. But Derek — absorbed in the only subject that could lift him above self-consciousness — forgot to be scrupulously correct either in sentiment or speech. When he lauded Kitchener as 'the straight goods,' and agreed with Sir Vyvian that all enemy aliens in Government offices should be 'fired good and quick,' Lady Avonleigh gasped in faint dismay: "My dear Derek! Have you forgotten how to talk English?"

"Sorry, Mother," he apologized, laughing. "One catches the tricks of speech."

"Racy and expressive. I like 'em," said the General, who seemed bent on luring him to his undoing. And they pursued their theme: rounding-up Germans, stiffening the Cabinet,

bringing all forces — spiritual, commercial, and neutral — into full play.

"Father feels just as you do, Uncle Vy," Derek concluded gravely. "It's all bound to come in time — unless we're prepared to face a drawn game. So — the sooner the better for every one. If we fancy we can defeat the Central Empires with one arm strapped up, we're in for a very rude awakening."

At this point Van managed to catch his eye; and Derek, perceiving he had blundered, tingled hotly and relapsed into polite generalities till the men were left alone.

After lunch the atmosphere was easier; but the old uncomfortable sense of being in the wrong was back upon him; and he wanted to get away for a talk with Van. When he kissed his mother, at parting, he felt no thrill of response; and she shook her head at him half playfully.

"You mustn't be disloyal, Derek, and abuse your own country — especially now you're wearing this!"

The gentle rebuke stung him to the quick.

"I'm not disloyal, Mother. I'm only — facing facts —"

But she held her ground. "I don't think one ought to be too clear-sighted, in *that* sort of way . . . where one loves."

It was useless to attempt self-justification. She would never understand —

When they had made their escape, he ran upstairs to see old Con, who had been listening for his step since lunch ended.

"There! *Didn't* I know you'd come!" she cried as he stood before her at the salute. Then, without more ado, she set her hands on his shoulders, and came very near kissing him, as on that far-off day of tragedy. She might, indeed, have ventured had she known that Derek of four and twenty would have minded it far less than did Derek of eight and a half.

"You're his Lordship all over," she inurmured, and could say no more, for tears stood in her eyes.

Derek, to relieve the tension, talked of his father and the wonders of Japan. "But I mustn't stop long," he concluded. "Mr. Van's waiting."

"Ah — he's not the one to be kept waiting!" she said, with

an odd change of tone. "But I knew you'd never forget your old Con."

"Not till I forgot my own name!" he assured her, and ran lightly downstairs. The hampering sense of *gêne* was gone —

They drove to the Albany in an open taxi; a mottled April sky overhead; flower-stalls gay with daffodils; a caressing softness in the air. Except that the streets were emptier, and the eye was assailed at intervals by recruiting posters, Derek found it was hard to believe — as he had said — that London was at war. The scare of financial ruin was past. The impulse to live frugally, out of respect for those good fellows in the trenches, had spent itself, more or less. The War was passing from an obsession into an atmosphere. It was possible — rather a relief in fact — to talk of other things. A long face killed no Germans and only made your neighbour feel down-hearted. So the old grey city was unobtrusively slipping back into its former pleasant ways — with a proper sense of difference, because those good fellows were, after all, still dying in the trenches, and suffering unspeakable tortures in the prison camps of Germany.

Van's drawing-room — with its pictures and bronzes, and capacious chairs — seemed an oasis embedded in the heart of peace. No disturbing reminders of conflict except an early edition of the *Westminster* reposing on a table.

Derek seized and scanned it eagerly; and they discussed the contents. 'Nothing doing' at the moment; and they had no inkling of the terrible event in store.

Then Van pushed him into the largest chair. "Good old Dirk of the Red Hand!" he said affectionately. "Can't scalp you now they've made a blooming convict of you! 'Member the great game?"

"Rather!"

"How d'you like my new decorations? Not so dusty — what?"

"A slight improvement on our local Y.M.C.A.!" Derek admitted, surrendering himself blissfully to the cushioned softness and the fragrance of Van's Russian cigarettes.'

For a time they puffed contentedly. Van seemed less fluent than usual; and Derek set it down to the War. As a matter of fact, he himself was the cause. Van was more struck by the change in his younger brother — whom he had patronized and mildly bullied — than he quite cared to admit. This new Derek, with his muscular frame and his Imperial outlook, gave Van almost a sense of having been left behind in a backwater. Mentally, he now seemed the older of the two. All the same, he had spread himself overmuch at lunch; and Van was minded to readjust the balance of things by taking him to task in elder-brotherly style.

"How do you think the Mother looking?" he asked by way of prelude.

"Lovely," Derek answered, speaking the simple truth. "A few more grey hairs, of course. Her eyes rather worried and her mouth a little strained —"

"Yes. This beastly business has shaken her a good deal. And look here, Dirks — I may as well give you the tip that the sort of stuff you talked at lunch only upsets her, and gives a wrong notion of yourself into the bargain —"

But if Derek had been hurt by his mother's rebuke, he was quite untroubled by Van's patronizing hint.

"I don't wear opinions for the look of them," he said coolly. "Sorry if they bothered her. But I believe most of what I said is true. Uncle Vy seemed to think so, and I know Father does. It's not pleasant of course. But — that's another story."

Van was nonplussed. Derek had slipped out of leading strings with a vengeance. He was tougher, inside and out. One could not play upon his sensitiveness as of old.

"There *is* such a thing as considering others," he remarked virtuously. "It makes people nervous — Mother especially — if there's a perpetual suggestion in the air that things are being muddled by the man at the wheel —"

"So they take chloroform!" murmured the unquenchable Derek. "I observe it's being freely administered to silence the critics."

"Well, hang it all, we can't fight the Germans *and* each other. Besides — if every one felt called upon to blurt out the indecent truth, life would be unlivable —"

"Which is the classical excuse — for telling lies!" said Derek, blowing smoke rings through one another.

"Dirks, don't be a fool, and don't slither off the point."

"Thought that was *your* pet parlour trick!"

Van, the imperturbable, changed colour and sat upright. "Look here, young 'un — d'you want me to go for you?"

"I wouldn't advise you to," Derek retorted with his sudden smile. "I'm some wrestler now! And I'm no longer the young 'un I used to was. Let's talk straight, old chap. I may not be an F. O. intellectual; but I lay I've come up against more all-round experience in the last two years than *you've* done since Oxford."

Van subsided and shrugged his shoulders. "That's possible. But you're such a confounded dark horse. What mysterious freaks *have* you been up to, Dirks?"

Derek looked at him quizzically a moment. "Not much mystery about any of 'em. I've worked on a farm and in a mine and on fruit ranches; and I've cut sandalwood in the Bush. But mostly I've been logging in B. C."

Derek had the satisfaction of seeing Van look frankly astounded. "Great — Scott! Does Father know all that?"

"Sure thing. I'm not ashamed of it."

"And what the deuce *is* logging?" asked the liberally educated Van.

"Lumbering," Derek translated and vouchsafed him a brief, picturesque account of the life. Van listened with unfeigned interest and increasing amazement.

"For more than two years, you've practically had no truck with gentlemen?" said he: and Derek raised his eyebrows.

"That's news to me. I spent a week with Jacko last summer; likewise I found some of my logging pals quite as good gentlemen as half the rich blighters you fool round with in London."

"Hul-lo! You turned democrat?"

"No. I suppose I'm what they call a Progressive Tory. I've merely learnt a little more about my kind. That's what I was out for, if you want the clue to my passing madness."

"And what's the Ultima Thule? Politics?"

"Well — that depends. If the War lasts long enough to put new life-blood into them and smash the caucus —"

Van smiled his most elder-brotherly smile. "You're not pliable enough for politics, old chap."

"No — not the present sort. But I hope I'll manage to serve my country some day, without developing an india-rubber spinal column! — Just now helping to defeat Germany is good enough for me."

"But why not a commission?"

"This suits me best. I settled it all with Father. I didn't fancy . . . Mother would understand; so I thought it would save arguments to arrive fixed up. — Bad luck you can't join. I should kick over the traces. Sir Roger would survive."

There was no hint of criticism in Derek's voice: but Van felt embarrassed, also a little annoyed.

"It's easy talking," he said, twirling his eyeglass. "Sir Roger has been awfully decent to me; and the least one can do is to consider his wishes. But that sort of thing has never been one of your strong points, old chap."

"No," Derek agreed without comment; and Van felt more annoyed than ever. He had looked forward keenly to this meeting; and Derek, instead of playing up, was being an infernal nuisance, with his private's uniform and his superior airs. Then Van remembered his hospital scheme: for he had almost arrived at believing his own tacit implications. Derek should see that *he* was not the only one of the family who was doing the correct thing.

"Did Mother mention our great plan — about Avonleigh?" he asked after a pause.

"Avonleigh?" Derek turned sharply, very much on the alert; and Van proceeded to explain.

Derek, while he listened, recalled certain talks about the old place in Bombay. "What does Father say?" he asked abruptly.

"Well — it's rather a sudden notion. We've had no time to consult him yet."

"But you talk as if it was all settled."

"It is — practically. I cabled this morning for his assent. They're short of good accommodation. It's not likely he'd refuse."

"N-no. But . . . I imagine he'd rather jib at the notion, unless he could run it himself. You might have waited."

Van frowned. "Wounded men can't wait. And you overlook the fact that he gave me very full powers. In a matter like this — if *I* see fit —"

"Oh — you'll run it yourself, then?" Derek asked with significant emphasis. — He knew his Van.

"'M — not exactly. I haven't the time. We thought of a small Committee. It'll cost something, of course. But they're all subscribing; and a good many friends are interested, too. Karl's father, old Schonberg — very free-handed and a first-rate organizer — is keen to help."

Derek started. "Do you propose to have Schonberg on the Committee?"

"If we can get him," Van answered with perfect suavity. "But I'm afraid he's full up."

"D'you see much of him, these days?"

"Naturally — considering his son's my assistant Agent. He's not half a bad chap. Brains enough for a dozen. Gives a thundering good dinner too, and has the devil's own luck in everything he touches —" Derek said nothing; and his critical silence — plus a natural impulse of self-justification — goaded Van into saying more than he had intended. "He's been showing up quite a lot in Town, lately. In with leading lights at Westminster, and all that. A jolly useful man to be friend with, I can tell you. What's your objection — you prickly old hedgehog?"

"Merely that Schonberg is thorough German and — we happen to be at war."

Van's laugh betrayed a faint uneasiness. "You think he ought to be behind barbed wire?"

"There or thereabouts. But I suppose the leading lights also find him a useful man to be friends with! I may be very dense, but it gets me altogether. Surely there is such a thing as common caution —"

"There's also common sense and common tolerance. I suppose we English are about the most tolerant lot in creation."

Derek's whimsical smile was Lord Avonleigh's own. "Strikes me that, in war, tolerance may become first cousin to treason. Certainly our enemies are clever enough to exploit our amiable weakness for all it's worth."

Van frowned. "You've the cheek of the devil. You imply — to my face — that Schonberg is an enemy. He's been thirty years in England, off and on. He's naturalized —"

"Since when?"

"Oh — four or five years ago."

"Shrewd man!"

"Confound you!" Van rapped out sharply. "Upon my soul, Dirks, you're the one person on earth who reminds me that I keep a temper. Lucky it's a mild one, or we'd quarrel outright. And I'd rather not."

"So'd I. Much rather not. But if you're death on Schonberg —"

"Rot! I merely find him useful; — and I don't intend to chuck him because he happens to have been born a German. In fact I've arranged a little foursome at the Carlton to-night for you to meet him and Karl."

At that Derek's prickles were up again. "Damn it, that's a bit too thick. If I distrust a man, I prefer to keep clear of him."

Van pressed the point with tactful insistence. "I say, Dirks, you can't refuse. It would put me in the hell of a hole. Karl wants to see you, too: and I suppose you make a distinction? He's not quite himself these days. He's doing great things for Avonleigh. It would please him if you took an interest."

"I do — very much so."

"Well, swallow your prejudice and I promise you a top-hole dinner. It won't hurt you to set eyes on old Schonberg and do

the polite once in a way. You may change your opinions at close quarters."

On second thoughts Derek decided that he might as well have a square look at the Burlton bogey, who loomed in his imagination like a Brocken figure, seen through the mist of Jack's suspicions and fears.

It was no Brocken figure, but a thick-set man, a size larger than life, who sat opposite to him that evening at Van's particular table, reserved for them by Van's particular waiter, who presented the 'carte' with a delicately emphasized air of respect that implied anticipation of a recherché menu and tips to correspond.

Derek, fresh to it all after his long absence, thoroughly enjoyed the familiar little comedy of gesture and glance, at his own table and the next and the next. But chiefly his attention was riveted by the heavy, inscrutable face of Adolf Schonberg, who seemed to dominate their little group by sheer force of personality. The droop of his thick eyelids, the set of his firm, fleshy lips and double chin suggested a formidable blend of caution and daring; a man of genuine power, who, in pursuit of his purpose, would unhesitatingly give away every one but himself. Instinctively Derek compared that solid wall of brow, the whole impressive effect of forces in reserve, with his brother's pleasant, thought-free face and serene air of taking it for granted that all things must work together for his personal good.

"Not a dog's chance for him," he thought, with a sudden contraction of the heart, "if the fellow's friendship is mere eyewash —"

Van's voice recalled him to more serious considerations. "Have you any little weakness, Dirks, in the entrée line? When Schonberg gives me the honour of his company, I usually leave him to pick the menu. But this is your funeral! It's a question of salmi *versus* vol-au-vent. Any use giving the wild woodsman a vote — what? Or would he be puzzled to tell t'other from which without the assistance of his senses?"

"He might," Derek agreed gravely. "But he had the luck to get a Chinese cook, in B. C., who made both to perfection."

"Wha-at? In a lumber camp?"

"No. In a bungalow I rented for a time."

The minute the words were out he could have bitten his tongue. For a gleam in Van's eye said plainly: "So you're not altogether the good little boy you would have us believe!" But he contented himself with a significant chuckle. "Plenty of pretty women in those parts — what?"

"Nothing to shout about," Derek answered, tingling with annoyance and helping himself out of several little white dishes. "But I'm not such a romantic chap as you are. I'm a better judge of cooks than of women; and the Chinese variety are the straight goods —"

"That's his elegant Canadianese for top-hole!" Van translated for Schonberg's benefit; and the great man looked up from a scientifically dissected sardine.

"I haf been in Ameriga — also Canada," he said, with an amused twitch of shaggy brows that communicated itself to the crown of his head and his prominent ears. The remark was addressed to Derek; and he added, with his guttural deliberation: "A great and strange people — the Shinese. Few things they mague in which they do not excel nations that belief they are miles in adfance. More than likely there will come a day when most of Asia shall be in their hands. I would bet three hundred against one that you young fellows shall lif to see it — if only the beginning. One liddle drawback is — *I* should not be alive to pogget my winnings!"

"Have you been there?" Derek asked. Already, in spite of antagonism, he was interested. He would have liked an hour's real talk with the Burton bogey.

Schonberg nodded.

"Business gonnnections, when I was younger and more active than now. A goot many gountries I haf sampled in my time; but for home — for friendliness and gomfort — none to equal our zo grey and zo green little Island."

The possessive pronoun set Derek's prickles on end; but at that point Van thrust in his oar.

"Steady on, you two! What's the voting — salmi or vol-au-vent? It's rather a more vital question, at this moment, than the future of China. Go ahead, Dirks."

"Oh, don't mind me, old chap! I reckon whatever Mr. Schonberg fancies will be good enough for us."

"I reckon it will!" Van mimicked him: and — the rest of the menu having been settled by that prince of gourmets — Van waxed solicitous over the particular brand of sherry that Schonberg favoured with his soup. Derek — half amused, half annoyed by his brother's deferential attitude — turned to Karl, whose manner was as quiet and contained as his father's was discursive and genial. But beneath the geniality Derek could detect the iron brain that had moulded the destinies of Burltons and had unmistakably gained some sort of hold on Van. It jarred him to see his suave, well-mannered brother show even the faintest sign of being too assiduous to please; and it made him wish from the bottom of his heart that his father could get back at once to England — and Avonleigh.

Yet, before the meal was well over, he found himself wondering, whether he had not been a trifle unjust in his judgment after all.

When they had reached the more expansive stage of coffee and liqueur brandy, he ventured — not altogether without guile — to speak of German penetration in Australia. He thought: "Since the old sinner talks of 'our little Island' we'll return the compliment by taking his loyalty for granted!"

For a time Schonberg listened in silence, affectionately finingering a large cigar, while this much-too-well-informed young man innocently prodded the most sensitive parts of his spiritual anatomy.

"I was told as a fact" Derek said, finally, addressing himself to Karl, "that, for years, the two most influential papers in Australia have been practically powerless to publish a mite of anti-German matter! How the deuce can they have let things come to such a pass?"

Karl sucked in his lips and glanced at his father, who looked up with a sudden lift of his lids that revealed the whole opaque iris, and startlingly changed his expression.

"My dear young man — gan you ask?" he said with silken suavity. "There is only one sure gominodity that will purchase the souls of men. The Chermans haf grave faults — yes. But they haf just so much gommon sense to know that inheriting the earth is not to the meeg. It is to him who can hide his brains in a bushel and pull fools by the nose, while making them belief they go their own way —"

"Well, I'm hanged if you can hide *your* brains under a bushel," Van struck in; — uneasiness lurked in his bantering tone. "And I haven't observed a tendency to pull your neighbours' noses. But I don't seem to see *you* coming off with short commons!"

Again that queer movement of the lids. "There is not always need to use the thumb and finger, my literal friend."

Something in the man's tone — was it the shadow of the shade of a sneer — provoked Derek to hit out once again. "Well, Mr. Schonberg," he said cheerfully, raising his glass, "here's hoping for the good day when we shall get our German neighbours so firmly by the nose that they will be under no delusion as to which way they are going!"

"*Zo!*" Schonberg rumbled with an unmoved countenance; tossed off the rest of his brandy and frankly smacked his lips.

When Van suggested an adjournment to the Palace, he excused himself with a jocose waggle of his head. "Very well for you — young dogs — *hein?* Snatch so mush possible of life while you can. I haf come to an age I can do without the women, when there are bigger fishes to fry. To-night I haf assignation with another mistress. If more exacting, also more profitable!"

"Business — at *this* hour!" remonstrated Van; and Schonberg chuckled in the depths of his diaphragm.

"*Ach!* You are a gentleman of leisure! For me all hours are business hours. — Goot-night, Mr. Blount. Great pleasure

to maig your acquaintance. You are so mush the son of your father, you will not long hide your light under *this* bushel, *hein?*"

But even the one compliment Derek never resented could not undo the effect of that queer facial change and the significant remark to Van.

When he had gone, Derek and Karl unanimously voted for musical comedy: and not till the brothers were alone again in the Albany did Van broach the thorny subject.

"Well — what's the verdict?" he asked airily. "I hope I see a humble penitent before me?"

Derek shook his head. "You see an obstinate sceptic before you!"

"But he's a notable fellow — what?"

"Sure thing. Capital company, for dinner: so far, no farther! Frankly I'd as soon make friends with a live shell. At least one would know how the land lay."

Van shrugged. He had a later engagement, with Léonie; and was feeling too lazy, too well pleased with life to argue the point.

"Confound you, Dirks — you're incorrigible," was all he said.

And Derek left it at that. But he decided to keep his eyes and ears wide open when his next pass enabled him to revisit Avonleigh and unburden his mind to Mark.

CHAPTER III

*Uppe and sette yt lance in restel
Uppe and follow on the queste,
Leave the issue to be guessed
At the endyng of the waye.*

OLD BALLAD

ON Salisbury Plain, in April of 1915, the improvised battalions of Kitchener's Army were beginning to look more like embryo soldiers and less like a demonstration of the unemployed. Broomsticks were still too much in evidence. There was still a famine of khaki and ammunition boots. Reservist N.C.O.'s, of South-African fame, still waxed blasphemous over the very mixed assortment of loyal counter-jumpers and clerks, undergraduates and ticket-collectors, whom it was their painful duty to hammer into more or less homogeneous platoons. Small need had they for repeated assurances that England had harboured no thought of war. They lived and moved among overwhelming proofs to that effect; till the more thoughtful were driven to conclude that her amazing unreadiness argued either a criminal lack of foresight, or a hidden intention to stand aside — at a price.

Derek had joined a Hampshire Service Battalion; and on the Monday following his dinner at the Carlton, he and his fellow 'rookies' spent an educative afternoon wheeling and marking time in ankle-deep mud; soaked to the skin, by thorough-going April showers; while a Reservist drill Sergeant thundered words of command, interlarded with compliments of the back-handed variety. It was: "Left, right — left, right — See here you, with the Bond Street boots — when I says left, I *means* left . . . About — tur-r-rn! Gor blimy! A Sunday school class could give yer points. As yer were — *as yer were!* Yer enough to give an archangel the hiccups — Gawd 'elp 'Is Majesty if ever *you gits to Frawnce!*"

This was not precisely encouraging, even though the compliments were collective; and the ordeal over, they straggled off the barrack square to watch the Battalion — nine hundred privileged beings who had passed beyond these initial miseries — swinging back from a sham fight to the strains of the popular lament:

'Left! Right! Left! Right!
Why did I join the Army?
Why did I ever join Kitchener's mob?
Lor lummy! I must 'a' bin balmy!"

So even the privileged had their grievances. They had enlisted in order to 'pot Germans'; and here they were fobbed off with moving targets and everlasting mimic battles in the mud.

Derek, who had thoroughly enjoyed the luxury of being himself again for a few months, found the process of re-adaptation not particularly pleasant. But it was good, beyond expression, to be Home again: to be even a microscopic unit in Kitchener's Army — that supreme expression of the Nation's single-hearted will to conquer.

He had heard plenty of the usual talk about wooden methods and the military mind: but now — working in the midst of it all — it was the miracle of elasticity that impressed him rather; the marvel of ordered control underlying the initial orgy of confusion and waste, born of a valiant attempt to cram into a few months that which should have been the work of years.

In his battalion he had the luck to find Smithers; and better still, his adventurous friend Bert: — transformed into the smartest of corporals and hugely tickled at the idea of treating Mr. Derek as an inferior in rank. He and his friend had done well with their little ranch. He was married, now, to a capable Canadian girl; and in the course of their second talk he had insisted on repaying, with interest, that momentous fifty pounds which had given him his chance. Derek drew the line at interest; but had finally accepted the fifty, because he saw that refusal would hurt his friend's proper pride.

It was by favour of his Captain, an old Oxonian, that he

secured a special pass on the Saturday after that disturbing little dinner in Town. The oftener he turned things over in his mind, the stronger grew his suspicion of some hidden link between Schonberg and Van; and he could not rest till he had gathered, indirectly, from Malcolm and Gosling, how Avonleigh was faring under the new régime. The revelation of the father's deep personal feeling for the old place had moved him deeply. From boyhood, he had wondered if any of them had quite the same sensations about Avonleigh as himself. Now he knew: — and the knowledge had gone far to dispel the mutual reserve that was due, in part, to Lady Avonleigh's failure as wife and mother.

In Government House, Bombay, Marion Blount had set herself to create a true home atmosphere for her brother; and there, in less than a month, this father and son — so little known to each other — had achieved a degree of intimacy as surprising as it was satisfying to them both. Derek's marriage, and all he had gone through, served to bridge, in a measure, the gulf of the years. They could talk together as men, with the freemasonry of their manhood between them.

Encouraged by his father's friendliness, Derek had produced a photograph of Lois in the graceful frock that had done duty for her wedding-dress. It was a flattering picture. Lord Avonleigh's admiration rang true; and a sympathetic question or two had unloosed Derek's tongue. They had sat till after midnight in Lord Avonleigh's sanctum; and Derek had spoken frankly of the idea underlying his *Odyssey*, with never a sapient smile or a tweak of sarcasm to pull him up short. He had also spoken frankly of Lois; and, before they parted, had told his father things he had not thought to tell any mortal soul. Quite simply and sincerely Lord Avonleigh had thanked him for his confidence. They never spoke of it again. And Derek was not unmindful that Lois — more potent in death than in life — had no mean share in it all.

More than once, during that delightful visit, he had marvelled at his youthful folly; but, in those days, any hope of real intimacy had seemed as far removed as the Mountains of the Moon.

And now that, at last, they had found each other, war inexorably thrust them apart —

So, to his own concern for Avonleigh was added the certain knowledge that his father would hate this insidious intrusion of Schonberg quite as much as he did himself.

He arranged to spend Friday night at the Avonleigh Arms and Saturday night at Wynchcombe Friars; and he gave Mark his 'reasons in writing' why the order was not reversed.

"I want to get at things first, old chap," he wrote, "then come and talk it all out with you."

And Tom Gosling was as likely a medium for getting at things as any publican in the countryside. The 'Arms' had a reputation for good measure and good company of which its owner was justly proud: and in those early days of acute alien peril he pressed that reputation into his country's service; sometimes with more zeal than discretion, but on occasion with brilliant results. But Derek went first to Malcolm's office, and appreciated keenly the welcome accorded to him by that inexpressive, lantern-jawed Scot.

In his Spartan, bachelor sitting-room he produced port and biscuits and Indian cigars — a gift from Bombay; and not till they had made good progress with the last did Derek approach the subject nearest his heart. The perfectly natural question: "D'you rub along all right with Karl Schonberg?" landed him in the centre of things without need of preamble.

Malcolm, in his negative fashion, expressed satisfaction with Karl. "Well — he's none of your conceited jackanapes — that dismiss every man over forty as an antiquated ass. He doesn't talk a great deal — but he works. An outsider might fancy he was keener about the Estate than Mr. Blount."

Derek smiled. "Van's a Londoner. And — he has a great opinion of Karl."

"H'm! That sort generally *has* the luck to be well served. Young Schonberg in my opinion has only two drawbacks. One's his name and the other's — his father."

"Hard luck!" Derek murmured with his twinkle; and added carelessly: "D'you dislike Schonberg?"

"*I dislike his nationality,*" was the cautious rejoinder; and Derek's twinkle deepened.

"That should go without saying by this time. The queer thing is — it doesn't. My father feels very strongly about the slackness at Home." A pause. "Do you see much of Schonberg down here?"

Malcolm grunted. "I don't. But — I gather this neighbourhood sees more of him than is altogether good for its health —" He looked keenly at the boy who had grown so like his admired Viscount. "Mind — I'm speaking in confidence, Mr. Derek, because we think the same about this business. And you may have some influence with your brother."

"No fear. He thinks I'm a scaremonger already."

"That's to say he suspects you of — telling the truth! No disrespect to Mr. Blount. He's *with* the majority and in good company. Which doesn't alter facts."

Derek took a long pull at his cigar. "You hear a good bit of talk, I suppose?"

"More than I care about. Of course I don't swallow it all. But I have my private suspicions that some of our villages are becoming centres of information; and I'm afraid there's a deal of eyewash about this internment business. We have more than a sprinkling of fishy characters, here and there. But whatever they're up to, they've wit enough to keep just within the law."

"Sometimes I wonder if the law doesn't cloak more sins than it punishes," was Derek's comment on that last; and his tone was as guarded as his words.

"Frankly, Malcolm," he added when they had smoked awhile in silence, "have you any reason to think Schonberg is connected with all this?"

Malcolm screwed his large mouth into a characteristic grimace. "Frankly, Mr. Derek, I haven't an ounce of reliable proof. All I know is — he's as clever as the Devil. A blood relation to that gentleman, in my opinion. Lately he's developed a keen interest in Hampshire — on his son's account, of course! Scoots all over the County in his runabout car. Luxuries for hospitals.

Drives for soldiers. I *have* heard that some of them jib at his name and accent."

"It's only on *this* side that Germany still receives 'most favoured nation' treatment," Derek remarked with an incisive quietness worthy of his father. "However, I'm glad you're satisfied with Karl."

"I am—on the whole. But he's a close fish. He puzzles me sometimes."

"Wish I could do more myself." Derek glanced at his wrist-watch. "I ought to be getting on to Ashbourne. If I wasn't cycling, I'd like to go over Burnt Hill. Any brilliant results up there yet?"

"If there are, we don't hear of them. But we hear a good many other things—"

"What *sort* of things?" Derek asked sharply. But Malcolm was caution incarnate.

"The sort it's wisest to take with a good pinch of salt:—explosives, invasion plans and signalling with lights. Bridgeman *may* be a harmless old cove. But the man and woman who run his house are aliens—of more than doubtful origin. *I'd* clear out the place at short notice, if it rested with me."

Derek rose impatiently, walked to the window and back to the hearthrug, where he took up his stand. "At least the house might be searched," he broke out. "Have you spoken to Van?"

"More than once," Malcolm answered in a level tone. "Mr. Blount considers the old man's connection with Burltons is sufficient guarantee—but I hear Schonberg has very large interests in that firm. One comes upon their cursed ramifications everywhere."

Derek merely nodded. On the whole, he thought it wiser to say nothing.

"I have also heard—" Malcolm went on, then checked himself and sat thoughtfully rubbing his chin.

"Well—what *now*?"

The land agent turned a keen eye upon him. "You'll get thinking I waste all my days in gossip. But—has Mr. Blount spoken to you about this hospital business?"

"Yes. It's a good notion."

"Excellent — if Lord Avonleigh was at home. But when I find people hinting that Schonberg is at the back of things, it's one more than I can stand, Mr. Derek. I'd like to be able to contradict it flat —"

"For Heaven's sake, *do so*," Derek exclaimed with unexpected warmth. "It's insufferable. As for the rest — I'll speak of it next time I see Van."

"Are you not going on there now? Mr. Blount's down this week-end; and I believe Schonberg's with him."

Derek tried to look as if he knew all about it. "I'm for Wynchcombe Friars myself," he said. "But I'll ride over and have a look at the old place — while it's still recognizable!"

He picked up his cap and stick: but he could not leave without putting the crucial question: "Have you ever — written about all this to my father?"

"No. I haven't. Yet I feel — he ought to know. If only there was something definite to lay hold of — if I could do anything. But — well — I've never been on confidential terms with your brother. It's the worst of luck that Lord Avonleigh should be away just now; and — please don't think I'm criticizing him — but I can't help wishing he had left Mr. Blount free to enjoy himself, and left *me* free to devote my energies to his interests."

Derek's complete agreement could, unfortunately, not be expressed: and he rode on to Ashbourne with a fine confusion of feelings in his heart, not least among them an increasing curiosity about Karl.

The country he knew and loved lay dreaming in a fugitive burst of April sunshine. And the sunshine of April has a crystalline quality; a transience — like the beauty of youth or of half-open buds — that May and June at their most radiant can never recapture. But though Derek seldom failed of response to the moods of earth, to-day the voice of Malcolm, the things he had said and left unsaid, filled his brain to the exclusion of all else.

That Van would wink at a good deal, sooner than bestir him-

self, went without saying: but Schonberg and Avonleigh . . . incredible! The mere suspicion of it infuriated him; but he knew from painful experience, that it was sheer waste of nervous energy to lose one's temper with Van. He would ride out in the morning and simply beg his brother not to let Schonberg become a prominent feature in the new scheme. That, he decided, would be the most tactful line to take.

Old Gosling — rubicund and elate — looked not a day older: nor had his famous veal pie and home-brewed ale lost their savour. They supped royally off both, while they talked of Canada and the way young Bert had come on.

"Looks like 'e'll turn out the pick of the bunch yet!" the old man concluded, with pride unfeigned. "And thar was *I* thinking 'e'd mostly got wind in 'is 'ead. An' thar was *you* knowin' the lad a sight better than 'is old father, 'oo fancied 'issel a bloomin' wiseacre!"

"Just a lucky guess on my part," said modest Derek. "The young know each other, by instinct, as the young and the old very seldom do."

"Never you spoke no truer word, sir. The deuce of it is the young *do* suffer with a notion that they got the answer to all the riddles o' the universe neatly tucked in their weskit pockets. And the old 'un, knowin' thar ain't no answer to most on 'em, gits thinkin' the young 'uns be fools. An' often as not 'e finds 'e's bin another kind o' fool 'issel, for 'is pains! But it's a pore kind o' father that won't take it smilin', when 'e's beat, so to say, by 'is own son. Paid up 'is money an' all. I'm right glad you took it, Mr. Derek — *on* principle."

Derek laughed. "I'd much rather have refused it on principle! But Bert's nearly as obstinate as I am."

They spoke of the Canadian wife and of Gosling's unseen grandson; but Derek refrained from any allusion to local tales. Given time, these would irresistibly emerge.

They did emerge, over pipes and a log fire. For Gosling owned a cousin in the County Police. He also made a point of being friendly with the men on the spot, who were doing their

loyal best under somewhat discouraging conditions; and he more than hinted at mysterious influences that stultified their vigilance and zeal.

"The Lord above knows old Goslin' ain't no tin-pot demikrat," said he, dismissing such deluded gentry to perdition with a gesture of his pipe. "But *bein'* British, I favour fair play for 'igh an' low. An' what I say is thar's something suspicious about the 'ole affair, when the nets we be spreadin' to catch them Germans-in-sheep's-clothing, do some'ow — quite innocent-like, let the biggest fishes slip through. No fisherman in 'is senses ever made a net o' that onnatural pattern: nor never would — *ef* 'e meant business. You take my meanin', sir?"

Derek was frowning thoughtfully at the fire. "There's more to it," said he, "than a plain man can fathom."

"Thar's money to it, Mr. Derek — *fy-nance*. Once 'twas Kings as ruled nations. Now 'tis dirty bits o' metal — a dam poor exchange in my 'umble way o' thinkin'. Ef the Devil 'isself took a mind to visit this earth 'is natural garment 'ud be Treasury notes — if you arst me! I 'appen to know about one o' these blokes — 'oo shall be nameless. The plice 'ave information enough to intern 'im three times over. But d'you think they can lay a finger to 'im — not they."

"Do you mean — hereabouts?" Derek asked with studied quietness.

"Well — 'ereabouts *an'* thereabouts. My friend the Constable says 'e's kind o' Yu-bikewy, like the Rawl Artillery! On'y one place you can take your dick you *won't* find him. That's be'ind barbed wire." Gosling's bleared eye winked significantly. "Mebbe you can guess 'oo the gentleman is; but we're on the safe side namin' no names."

"Quite so," Derek agreed gravely. "And you'll be safer still, if you discount about fifty per cent of the tales you hear — even on good authority. Nothing would vex my father more than that Avonleigh should become the centre for that sort of thing."

"No more it would 'a done — *ef* 'is Lordship 'ad bin 'ere, Gawd bless 'im," Gosling ventured very low.

Derek could neither deny nor affirm that self-evident remark: so he said nothing.

He felt angrier than ever with Van; and his sleep that night, in Mrs. Gosling's four-poster, was neither so sound nor so refreshing as on the night of his great decision.

CHAPTER IV

Reality is the offender; delusion the treasure of which we are robbed.

GEORGE MEREDITH

BEFORE starting next morning, Derek telephoned to Van and received a friendly invitation to 'roll along.' Then he ventured a question: "Is Schonberg there?"

"He'll be down this afternoon. We're fixing up hospital plans. Can't you stay?"

"No, thanks. I'm for Wynchcombe Friars."

He left Gosling with a renewed injunction not to give Avonleigh a bad name by letting the 'Arms' become a centre for spy talk.

"If you do get hold of reliable information, pass it on to Mr. Malcolm or me. Don't make capital out of it at the bar."

The good man beamed on him. "You trust old Goslin', sir. Goslin' 'e were born, but 'e ain't growed into a Goose, so far as 'uman eye can see! But — serious, sir — I wouldn't go ag'in' your wishes nor vex 'is Lordship for a mine o' gold."

"Wonder if I've done an ounce of good," Derek reflected un-hopefully as he rode away. "They're both right. Father ought to be here. But who the devil is going to tell him so?"

The nearer he drew to Avonleigh, the less he relished a renewal of the Schonberg argument. For he resented fiercely, if foolishly, the mere idea of the man's presence at Avonleigh; and he felt too hot over the whole affair to be any match for his cool-tempered elder brother, who had been consistently favoured, and given every chance; and who was repaying his father's implicit trust in this very doubtful fashion . . .

To-day, as on that earlier occasion, he chose his favourite approach through the Park. Here birds were singing and leaf

buds breaking. Daffodils and primroses gleamed like patches of sunshine. Oaks and beeches had not yet lost the austere beauty of their winter outlines; and a lively wind rippled over the grass, dappling it with restless shadows.

Alone with Nature, he felt blessedly at ease. Up there, in the house, he had difficult things to say and very little idea how he meant to say them. Under his own great beech tree he sat a while on a tussock of moss; forgetting Schonberg and the War and doubts of Van; seeing ghosts, and marvelling that places and things inanimate should strike such deep roots into the heart of man. They would be lucky devils, those invalid officers whom Fate sent to Avonleigh. Derek could imagine no place better fitted to heal the mental and physical wounds of war. But for this confounded German, how keenly he would have entered into the whole idea! The mutual interest would have been a real link with Van.

Now it seemed more than likely to breed discord and spoil half the pleasure of his few months at home.

The great oak door stood open; and in the hall Derek encountered Van's living shadow Franz — now Francis — the immaculate Bavarian-Swiss, whom Derek regarded as an annoying proof of Van's refusal to realize that this war was no mere clash of armies, but a matter of life and death.

"Where shall I find Mr. Blount?" he asked; and Francis conducted him to the morning room.

On the low window-seat, in a flood of sunshine, sat Van, with his *Daily Telegraph* and cigarette. Just above his head drooped a spray of *Gloire de Dijon*, and the young leaves against the light gleamed like drops of wine. To Derek, his mother's sanctum was among the least familiar rooms in the house. It was linked chiefly with the poignant memory of that other April morning sixteen years ago. And now, as the door swung open, the whole thing rushed back on him with a curious shock. There sat Van in the window, his attitude almost identical, even to the familiar movement of his foot. And here was he, once more on the point of outraging Authority, with every prospect of being metaphorically scalped for his pains.

The dream sensation was gone in a flash. Van had risen with a flourish of his paper.

"In the humble guise of a private soldier the wanderer returns to his ancestral halls!" said he, in mellifluous recitative. "This printed rag should by rights be a Union Jack. But you sprang the great occasion on me unawares. You've quite a talent in that line, old boy. Is it done for effect?"

"Sure thing!" Derek answered with becoming gravity. "Carefully thought out weeks in advance."

Van laughed. "Dry up, you young rotter. Have a smoke?"

Derek helped himself and murmured: "*Has a cigarette ever been smoked in this room before?*"

"Occasionally — by me! And the dear soul isn't here to be distressed by the fragrance of my Russians. So — what matter?"

The argument was typical of Van's moral code; and the thought occurred to Derek: "Father isn't here to be distressed by Schonberg's guttural accent, so — what matter?" He sank into a big chair near the window.

A few belated scillas starred the lawn across the pathway, and right opposite him was the carved table where the great vase had stood in splendid isolation. Now only a couple of novels lay there; but his inner eye saw, clear as life, the ghost of the murdered treasure and of his own childish figure, fatally defiant to the last. The sensations of that April day had bitten deep into his soul. He wondered whether Van had forgotten all about it.

The next moment, as if answering his thought, Van laid down his paper and remarked: "'Member the poor old Satsuma, Dirks?'"

Derek gave him a quick look. "Not likely I'd forget."

"The punishment stuck, eh?"

Derek's mouth twitched under his moustache; and Van looked down at him with affectionate concern. "Mother was a shade too down on you. But she had a particular affection for the murdered vase —"

"That's enough, thanks —"

"What the deuce —! D'you *still* mind —?"

"I've always minded — about Mother," Derek admitted awkwardly.

"Poor old chap! Yet you hardly ever move a foot in that direction without bringing it down in the wrong place. Anyway, she was jolly pleased to see you again the other day."

"So I gathered," said Derek curtly — and changed the subject. "Will she really let this room be desecrated by stray males and possible pipes?"

"Well, she isn't exactly keen. Perhaps we can consecrate it to visitors and tea-parties."

"And Father's library — you won't use that?"

"Why not? It would make a capital card-room."

"But — all his private things — it doesn't seem fair. If he were at home, it would be different."

"Well, he isn't. So we must do the best we can. — You seem dead nuts on Father these days."

"Yes — I never properly knew him before. I wish he looked fitter. But he's got a ticklish job out there; and the whole European situation is badly on his mind. One can see how he's aching to be at home — I *do* think his own particular room might be sacred, Van."

"Right-o, you persistent beggar. I'll put it before the Committee as your contribution."

"What Committee — where?"

"Here — to-morrow." He proceeded to explain that the Select Committee of Arrangements was arriving that afternoon: seven of it, including himself and Schonberg, Ina and her particular pal, Sir James Bellew, the eminent author, whose pen and purse were at his country's service for the duration of the War.

"Are you in the chair?" Derek asked quietly.

"Yes — on this occasion."

"Only on this occasion?"

"What are you fussing about, young 'un? I'm not lord of infinite leisure. When I can't attend, Schonberg has kindly promised to act for me. He's a past-master at the game,"

"*Schonberg!*" Amazement and anger sounded in Derek's voice. "A foreigner and a rank outsider! Why the devil—"

Van reddened to the roots of his hair. "No need to invoke the devil," he said. Annoyance intensified his drawl. "Are you thinking it ought to be yourself?"

"Of course it ought," Derek flamed back at him. "But that's impossible —"

"Yes — on *every* account," drawled Van. "You've no tact. You'd flourish the undraped truth in their faces and set 'em all squabbling. Personally, I detest committees. Too much sweat; too little result."

He was swerving from the point, but Derek would not have it.

"Which is to say — Schonberg will practically run the show," he said in a repressed voice. "I call that a bit too thick."

"You can call it what you damn well please. Schonberg's simply a generous contributor. He's up to the eyes in really big things; and any help he is good enough to offer I shall accept gratefully. But it's not his show — nor yours either. So just drop it, old thing, and don't be a ruddy fool. I thought we agreed not to quarrel over him —"

It was so reasonable, so plausible, that Derek at once began to feel in the wrong: — a sensation he knew too well. But the cooler atmosphere restored his chance of making the plea he had in mind.

Heaving himself out of the chair, he perched on the arm of it and confronted Van.

"Heaven knows I don't want to quarrel," he said placably. "And if you're dead certain you can trust Schonberg, I suppose you've made the whole position quite clear to Father. Have you convinced *him* — may I ask? — that your rather inappropriate partner in good works is a model of all the virtues?"

Van raised a shapely hand to stifle a yawn.

"See here, Dirks, if you're really on the peace tack, it wouldn't be a bad move to try minding your own business by way of a change! Kindly file for reference the fact that while I'm master here, I do what I think fit. The account of my stewardship is due to Father — and no one else. So it's sheer waste of breath

slinging the Shorter Catechism at my head. As to Schonberg, I've found him a gentleman to deal with and I shall continue to treat him as such. On that point we must agree to differ."

Derek, maddened by Van's skill in evading the direct question, simply inclined his head.

"I suppose I have leave to suggest," he remarked with his father's silken quietness, "that, in your own interests — not to mention Avonleigh — it might be as well to walk warily, even with a 'gentleman' of that nationality. Of course, you're boss of the show; but . . . fact is . . . I'm feeling a bit worried. I slept at the Arms last night and I've seen Malcolm this morning —"

"Ah — that accounts!"

"It doesn't. Give me half a chance, Van. You can't deny that Malcolm's in a position to hear more talk about local affairs than you are; and as he's shrewd enough to discount a good deal of it, the remainder may be worth serious consideration, in these critical times."

Under Van's suave smile there lurked the suspicion of a sneer.

"Really, old chap, you're hugely edifying. But I humbly recommend some more innocuous amusement, when you're out 'on pass,' than encouraging Malcolm and Gosling to repeat the rank rot that's passed from mouth to mouth with additional tit-bits every time. If Gosling's going to make a nuisance of himself over Schonberg, he'll receive a very unpleasant shock one of these days. He's an arrant gossip and a born liar."

"He's *not* a liar!" Derek retorted, hotly.

It might be waste of nerve force losing his temper, but Van's coolness and condescension were goading him to the other extreme; and the veiled threat against Gosling startled him out of his self-control.

"What the deuce do you mean about an unpleasant shock?" he added, with an out-thrust of his chin that should have warned Van to go cautiously if he wanted to keep the peace.

But he, too, was more ruffled, more uneasy, than he cared to show.

"I mean" — he answered between puffs of a fresh cigarette —

"a gentle reminder that the Arms is not his own property, in the shape of notice to quit."

Derek changed colour.

"Good Lord — you'd never play such a low-down game —"

"I should do whatever I thought best for Avonleigh, even at the risk of rousing your righteous indignation! The old sinner knows he can't fool *me*; and if he fancies it'll serve his turn to butter you up, he'll find himself mightily mistaken."

Derek's smothered exclamation was dismissed with a gesture.

"All I can say is, he laid it on with a trowel last time I saw him. Some fancy tale about your giving young Bert a leg up. I didn't listen to half, nor believe one-third."

"Well, as it happens, he spoke the truth."

Derek was annoyed with Gosling, but the temptation to refute Van's complacent scepticism was too strong for him.

Van removed his cigarette and scrutinized his younger brother with narrowed eyes.

"Blest if I can see what call *you* have to go playing Providence to young Gosling. It's bad policy — and it's none of your business."

"It's none of yours, either, what I choose to do with my own money."

"I'm not so sure — in a case like this. What the dickens are you getting at, Dirks, sucking up to Father's tenants on the quiet? In my position, I consider I've the right to ask."

"You can ask till all's blue. I'm damned if you'll get an answer."

Derek's hand closed sharply on the back of the chair. Never before had he felt like hitting out at his suavely provoking elder brother. In the logging world he had learnt to argue with his fists; and that seemed the only form of argument calculated to shake Van out of his serene self-assurance. But the earlier years of control prevailed.

"I warn you fairly," he went on, with a straight look. "I won't swallow insults — from you or any one. If you're incapable of doing another fellow a good turn on impulse — I'm sorry for you. I've been friends with old Gosling since I was a

kid. He's the goods, right enough, even if he *does* own a little weakness for his neighbours' affairs. Father hasn't a more loyal and devoted tenant — I don't believe he would forgive you."

Van frowned impatiently.

"Oh, shut it, for God's sake. I'm fed up with your superfluous concern for Father. If Gosling and his gossips make Ashbourne a centre for spy talk and 'hidden hand' fairy tales, he'll clear out neck and crop; and I'll square myself all right, no fear. Nothing Father would dislike more."

"Quite so — *except the thing itself*," Derek retorted, unable to control his rising wrath. "You're fooling round over the shadow. I'm after the substance. That's our main point of difference. You'll come down like a ton of coals on Gosling's harmless zeal; but you wink the other eye at Burnt Hill House. We underlings mustn't *talk* about spies and secret German influence, because it upsets your digestion. But you swallow Schonberg and his 'contributions' without blinking."

At that Van's eyebrows twitched, and Derek, seeing that he had made a hit, pushed it home.

"If you *do* the kind of thing that breeds talk, you must accept the results, and it's rank injustice to jump on the other parties. I heard this morning that Schonberg and his money are *said* to be at the back of the whole hospital scheme. Of course I contradicted it flat and told Malcolm to do the same. But it's the sort of thing people *will* say; and I felt you ought to know."

Van moistened his lips. It was not exactly pleasant, having spurned rumours, to find himself confronted with the truth.

"Very thoughtful of you," he said, in a constrained voice. "And as usual, a trifle superfluous. I'll give Malcolm a piece of my mind on Monday. I know perfectly well what I'm up to, thanks, though you mayn't suppose it. Besides — what the devil can *you* know of Schonberg?"

To that direct question, Derek was not the man to give an evasive answer.

"I know his type, and what they're mostly after over here. I also know more than you do about Burltons. The old man's done for himself, though he doesn't see it yet. I'm not talking

hot air, Van. Knocking around the world, I've picked up some queer facts about 'Deutschthum' that don't come your way in polite London circles. It's the same tale everywhere; the same devilish game, worked from the big brain centre in Berlin. They vary it to suit the little weaknesses of their friends; and over here, naturalization's the ticket. So we're favoured with Schonberg and Co. Of course he's colossally clever. Knows just how to make himself useful. But I tell you straight, if you're not jolly careful to keep independent of him, you may find that, in return, he's been making use of you — for his own ends —"

At that Van sprang to his feet, anger and fear contending within him.

"Damn you — *shut your mouth!* Because I'm a good-tempered chap, you think you can come here and spout half-penny-rag melodrama and vilify my friends. I tell *you* straight, it's more than I can stick. As you evidently can't contain yourself, and you're death on melodrama, all I have to say is — there's the door!"

Though shaken out of himself, the last was not quite seriously meant, as his extravagant gesture implied. But if Derek had gone too far in one direction, Van had gone too far in the other.

Derek flashed a look at him, rose and walked quickly away.

"I say — Dirks — you young fool —" Van called after him.

But he did not or would not hear: and Van was not in the mood to follow him. It was a horrid nuisance, for he was really fond of Derek; but the boy had brought it on himself and was hopelessly unmanageable, when roused.

So he remained there, on the window-seat, feeling jarred and thoroughly uncomfortable; for Derek's talk, however exaggerated, had skimmed unpleasantly close to the truth . . .

And Derek, coasting down the drive, was feeling only a few degrees less uncomfortable and more deeply unhappy. He had stumbled, as usual, into the very *impasse* he most desired to avoid. Worse, he was distracted on Van's account, as well as

his own. That his mild-mannered brother should have spoken so to him, seemed proof positive that his suspicions were justified, his warning vain. In the heat of the moment, he swore he would not come near Avonleigh again. And he had promised himself the pleasure of a tour through the house and grounds while all was yet unchanged . . .

He had not gone far when he noticed a familiar-looking figure ahead of him, and recognized Karl.

"Why isn't he up there with Van?" was his instant thought. "They don't seem nearly so thick as they used to be."

Karl, who had never interested him much, now seemed something of a problem. He had certainly been unlike himself at the Carlton. And suddenly a light dawned on Derek. Was Schonberg the key to the problem? Reawakened curiosity eased his pain.

"I'll try and draw him out," thought he. "See what I can make of him."

So he overtook Karl, dismounted, and shook hands. Then they walked on together, talking chiefly of Avonleigh. He was keen, frank, and friendly; a different man. But not a word of Avonleigh Hospital or of Van; and Derek decided to try the effect, in much the same spirit that an experimental scientist drops a new chemical into his solution.

"I've just been up at the Hall," he remarked. "They've a great Committee on to-morrow."

Karl looked politely interested. "I'm dining there to-night," was all he said.

"I should have thought you'd be gracing the Committee as well."

"No. I'm not so indispensable as all that! Besides — Van's Londoners might jib at two Schonbergs on a small Committee. I wouldn't blame them if they did."

He spoke lightly; and Derek would have liked to know whether a seat had been refused or not offered; but felt it would be tactless to press the point. Karl's last remark, more naturally spoken, surprised and pleased him; and as the Hospital subject was a 'frost,' he decided to try rumours about Burnt Hill House.

Karl, it transpired, was neither ignorant nor contemptuous. His manner was at once alert and guarded, lest his own anxiety should imply any reflection on Van.

"It's only natural they should talk," he admitted. "Certainly the woman's Swiss; and the man says he is. I confess I'd be glad if Van would bestir himself a little. I did speak of it once, but he won't have Bridgeman worried and he hates any sort of fuss. So —!" He spread out his hands expressively. "After all — it's his business. But he's down here so seldom. Never knocks round the place like your father did. Of course, there's Malcolm. But they clash a bit, don't they?"

"Yes. They've always clashed. But Van thinks no end of you, Karl."

The younger Schonberg glanced sidelong at Van's very individual brother.

"I appreciate the compliment! And I do my best to live up to it. Things were easy enough before the War. But now —" He sucked in his lips and let them out with a smack. "Well — we're in a difficult position some of us, who have German names and English sympathies."

"It must be — confoundedly difficult."

The genuine sympathy in Derek's tone moved Karl to further frankness.

"Look at myself, for instance. Do what I will, there's no getting over the link with Germany — my relations — my father —"

"And *his* sympathies?" Derek ventured.

"You must judge by his actions — as I do. I find it hard to speak positively about my father in any connection. Though we're quite good friends, we've never been intimate. That's not his way. He's a remarkable man — a strange, lonely man."

"He seems to have taken a great fancy to Van."

Karl smiled. "Van's a confoundedly attractive person. But I wish he would keep his eyes wider open these days. The trouble is — he's only one of thousands. The English as a whole are so amazingly blind in some directions. They — we are such a queer mixture. Idealists and adventurers, in the grain; yet

cursed with a habit of assessing everything in terms of cash. And the Germans take full advantage of both qualities. We, that are half German, see that. And we hate it. At least — I know I do."

He was rewarded by one of Derek's friendliest smiles, which encouraged him to add, in the same level tone: "It makes one doubtful, sometimes . . . about the future. There's only one safe, sane thing to do — intern the lot of us. Those that are loyal should be willing to suffer the inconvenience for the safety of the country. Lord knows *I* would be."

At that astonishing statement Derek turned impulsively and held out his hand. "Damn it, Karl, you *are* the goods."

"You haven't — always thought so?"

"I haven't quite — known what to think," Derek answered truthfully.

Then shyness fell on them. They quickened their pace and tried to look as if they had not been guilty of a very un-English demonstration —

"Say, Karl," Derek asked suddenly. "Have you ever spoken to Van — the way you've been talking to me just now?"

"No."

There was a hint of finality about the negative that Derek was not the man to disregard. It painfully recalled his own abortive attempt; and the mental jerk backward reminded him that he was supposed to be catching a train. He consulted his watch.

"Clean missed it!" he said cheerfully. "Better than missing our talk, though! I can ride on to the junction and wire to Mark. Keep your eye on things, Karl. If Van does seem a bit casual, we must remember — it's how he's made."

They shook hands again at parting; and Karl waved his stick as Derek rode off.

CHAPTER V

*Though we knew that, at the last, Death would have his lust of us,
Carelessly we braved his might; felt — and knew not why —
Something stronger than ourselves moving in the dust of us;
Something in the Soul of Man still too great to die.*

LIEUT. E. A. MACINTOSH, M. C.

*They said farewell to their habitual affections; and
went out singing to their marriage with death.*

LIEUT. CONINGSBY DAWSON

IT was a long spin to the nearest junction, but Derek had more than enough to occupy his mind. His talk with Karl had eased, a little, his bitter sense of failure; but it had deepened his anxieties and revived his earlier criticism of Van, whom even a world at war could not lift an inch out of his mental groove. All he asked was leave to enjoy himself in peace and comfort. If awkward facts threatened to disturb him, he simply would not look them in the face. And Van — with variations — abounded in every profession. Jack's father was a variant in point. Poor old Jack! How often he had chaffed him about exaggerating Schonberg's potency for evil. Now he understood. In defiance of common sense, the man gave one a queer feeling of stealthy, inexorable power: the very symbol of modern Germany, whose unresting, ubiquitous activities — too little recognized — made her loom more than life-size to those who knew something of her skill in disintegrating and demoralizing the simpler, finer races of earth. In the course of his wanderings, Derek had caught glimpses, if no more, of that insidious, disruptive process; and those glimpses had been confirmed by talks with his father. For Lord Avonleigh was counted among the discerning few who, year after year, had been compelled to watch the country they loved complacently thrusting her head into the German noose.

"Make friends in order to betray them, is their perverted notion of patriotism," he had told Derek, perceiving that this son would not dismiss his talk as prejudice or obsession. "And they have friends in every Court and Cabinet in Europe. Since this War began, we have all had a bitter taste of the first fruits of their labours; and unless we combine ruthlessly against them now, the second crop may prove more terrible than the first."

To-day those words came back to Derek with a painful significance. Nothing he had seen or heard, since his return, gave the smallest promise of ruthless or concerted action: and his own sense of helplessness brought home to him the larger helplessness of his country — ensnared on the one hand; and, on the other, virtually betrayed.

Everywhere — through lies cunningly overlaid — Germany had apparently prevailed — up to a point; even as Schonberg was prevailing with Burlton and Van. Yet which of them dared hint to Lord Avonleigh that his own son seemed culpably careless of the trust committed to him? Derek was fain to admit that his father had put poor Malcolm in a cruelly awkward position; and he chafed acutely against his own inability to help. Yet he could do no more for Van. That he recognized, bitterly enough. His mother would hear a revised version of his 'interference'; and the faint hope of a closer relation with her would vanish into air —

It was an immense relief to reach Wynchcombe Friars and Mark, whose recent engagement to Sheila Melrose was still the talk of the neighbourhood. At a bend in the drive, they almost collided; and Derek, dismounting, walked back beside his friend's wheeled chair.

The shock of realizing his crippled condition was softened by his exaltation of spirit over Sheila's 'angelic refusal to be refused.' And Derek listened to it all with few comments, though not without an occasional tweak of envy. He, who was physically sound, had a sudden, strange sense of being crippled in the inward parts. Not for him this sane, passionate adoration of the woman that seemed to have made Mark less assured, less egotistical, than of old. . . .

But the friendly atmosphere of Wynchcombe Friars was not conducive to introspection tinged with bitterness.

Lady Forsyth, hearing their voices, ran out, hatless, to greet him, followed more leisurely by Sheila herself.

The elder woman set her hands on Derek's shoulders and kissed him.

"Welcome home, my dear," she said. "You couldn't have appeared at a happier moment!" Then she stood back, surveying him, noting the change within and without. "Your deputy mother is proud of you," she added, on a graver note of feeling, and slipped a hand through his arm.

At lunch Macnair appeared, trying not to look self-conscious, and succeeding moderately well. The four of them, so happily united, made a mere unattached unit feel a distinct anomaly in the scheme of things: and once more Derek experienced that faint tweak of envy which a devotee of freedom had no business to feel.

It was good to be alone again with Mark, to be driven all over the estate, to hear about his colony for the disabled, his comprehensive scheme for settling soldiers on the land and reviving social village life. Mark, without some great scheme or inspiration on hand, would not be Mark. War that had battered his body, had not quenched the ardour of his spirit: and it was this very ardour, coupled with the streak of genius and leadership in him, that had always made Derek regard him as the stronger character of the two. Mark himself was under no delusion on that score.

Tea on the terrace, followed by music, brought back a genuine whiff of old times. And because the friends had only the one night together, Derek was allowed to sit up till all hours by Mark's bedside, telling much and hearing more of those intimate things that can only be half told at best.

Both had passed through deep waters, but, by comparison with Mark's strange experiences, his broken body and shattered nerves, Derek's depths seemed mere shallows. His own ordeal by war was still to come. Yet Mark's was the more elastic nature, the readier tongue. Unlike his friend, he had never been

completely isolated in spirit; and Derek, in consequence, heard more than he told. Having so unexpectedly opened his heart to his father, he could not bring himself to traverse the whole ground again; and Mark could be trusted to understand. He gathered quite enough, before midnight, to make him fear that the thing might have gone deeper with Derek than he chose to confess.

Some day — perhaps —?

Meantime, it was plain that the War possessed his soul to the exclusion of all else. So they pursued that inexhaustible theme to their heart's content; and on Sunday evening Derek travelled back, in a very mixed frame of mind, to his route marching and drilling in the mud.

Very soon, drilling in the mud gave place to manoeuvres and musketry, with such rifles as were slowly coming to hand. Very soon, also, came news of the second great stand at Ypres and the fresh horror added to war as conceived by Germany.

Derek discovered how securely Canada had annexed a portion of his heart when he read how the flower of her new-made Army — gassed, perforated by machine guns, and hopelessly outnumbered — had fought through a night and a day; and again a night and a day; hanging on by their eyelids to an almost impossible position, till reinforcements reached them and the onrush was checked.

Then the wounded came pouring in. . . .

Derek had permission to visit the Canadian hospital, where he found Abe Callander, with a shattered hand and forearm. But most of his pals were left behind him, on the field of honour.

"Maggots and Dan and Macrae of Beulah Ranch — you may remember?"

Did Derek not remember?

Mick had pulled through a dose of gas sufficient to kill three men. "But, Dan being gone," Abe added gravely, "the poor cuss gets wishing they'd given him enough for six."

Derek could well believe it; the more so when he found Mick himself — a great, gaunt framework of a man; his eyes, startlingly

blue and fierce, sunk deep in their sockets; and in his heart a consuming fire of hatred — he, the most large-hearted of men. For he had seen his brother die in agony; dastardly choked out of life by fumes as poisonous as the spirit that bred them. In hoarse, spasmodic whispers he confided to Derek that for him life held no purpose, now, but the dogged resolve to get back 'out there,' and kill and kill . . .

"Smoke 'em out! Give 'em a taste of their own hell. Mebbe Europe'll be a cleaner place when we've wiped the floor of France an' Belgium with the blank lot of em — Kaiser an' all!"

Derek returned to camp fired with a deep and abiding indignation. He bade the kindly, unimaginative men of his own regiment visit the Canadians and see for themselves precisely what manner of devil German civilization had let loose upon earth. Till his turn came to fight, he could only do his insignificant best to exorcise that easy-going spirit of tolerance and apathy, that was insidiously paving the way for defeat.

And all this while no word from Van. Both were bad correspondents; but Derek had hoped for a casual expression of regret, while Van was probably awaiting a casual form of apology.

Lady Avonleigh wrote at intervals; and her sole reference to the quarrel was so characteristic that it touched up Derek's humour, even while it hurt.

"I was sorry to hear from Van that you and he had a little disagreement over Avonleigh plans. Such a pity, dear, directly you come home, to make an unpleasantness by interfering in matters that you can't possibly know much about, having been so long away. And, after all, dear Van is in your father's place. He has heavy responsibilities, and I think we should all try to *help* and not *hinder* him. . . ."

Van's revised version had evidently been one of his best samples; and Derek felt less than ever disposed towards amicable advances.

To his father he now wrote regularly and at length. Only on the one subject he could say little or nothing — which pained him considerably. But if his activities were checked in that direction, they found outlets sufficiently satisfying, in the ardu-

ous business of training and the amenities of camp life. War had given him, unsought, his original desire, the chance of living and working in close comradeship with the ruck of his own kind — and not the ruck only. In a service Battalion of the New Army, a man could glean a dozen points of view besides that of the British artisan — the clerk, the journalist, the aristocrat, the countryman and the cockney, — flung together, pell-mell, by one imperishable instinct — the love of his own land.

Denied, sneered at, systematically damped down by the little breed of men who had juggled with England's destiny, it leaped forth, a living flame, at the first real threat of danger to the Empire. In defiance of cranks and the Stock Exchange, a man will still defend his own soil, the sacred traditions of his race; and Derek Blount, with the record of a great house behind him, knew very well that tradition — though it can be perverted into a substitute for life — is, in its essence, one of the great spiritual forces of earth. It makes high demands. It sets a standard: and as, without vision, so without a standard, the people perish.

Though the scratch units of Kitchener's 'Mob' sang comic songs and refused to take themselves seriously, they knew in their hearts that the splendid record of the old Army through the centuries — and its final crown of martyrdom in the Great Retreat — was the light that lighted every man who joined the New Army, though he came with a joke on his lips or secret reluctance in his soul. So, too, these very new Hampshires burned to emulate the very old Hampshires, though they said not a word about it; and Derek was quick to catch both the spark of ambition and the cloak of carelessness that kept it hid.

He had suffered not a little at first from the feeling of being sucked into a vortex, of the collective war-spirit clamouring for possession of his individual soul. And, for a time, he resisted instinctively. Then the war-spirit took hold of him like a religion; reducing life to its simplest elements; burning up all complexities and false values in the white flame of one great and terrible issue.

When that came to pass, he was a civilian no longer; simply a fragment of fighting England; and it was well with him.

Hard upon the desperate heroism of Ypres followed the tragedy of Festubert; and all through May the Russian armies that should have been marching on Berlin were retreating — steadily retreating —

It was near the end of the month that Derek received a note from Van:

DEAR DIRKS, — Are you sulking down there or too deeply engaged to give us a thought? If it's the former kindly buck up and don't be a fool. Father seems satisfied with my arrangements, so you needn't exhaust yourself on *his* account. London's topping just now in spite of this everlasting war. So come and have a squint round in my company.

Yours

VAN

That note with its friendly touch of patronage — at once amused and annoyed him. But it was high time he saw them all — and London — again. So he spent two nights at Avonleigh House and went out both evenings with Van. None of them alluded to Schonberg or the Hospital; and he himself had need to keep the door of his lips with scrupulous care. Above all, he must not criticize the Government or make pessimistic remarks. And as the general outlook — at home and abroad — did not strike him as particularly rosy, conversation proved rather uphill work.

On the third day he parted from them all with a depressing sense of relief — which he assured himself was probably mutual — and went straight to Wynchcombe Friars on a very important errand.

Mark and Sheila were to be quietly married before they all left for Scotland; and Derek's services were required as best man. He travelled down with John Burlton, Sheila's uncle, who had been asked to give her away; and their talk was chiefly of Jack, who had manœuvred an exchange into an infantry battalion sadly depleted of officers.

"He says cavalry's a bit out of it in this never-ending trench business; and I'm afraid — I wasn't altogether sorry for that!" Jack's father confessed with a rueful smile. "But you can't

blame the boy. He's learning to throw these new bombs they're so keen about. Tricky things! I'd sooner trust a rifle any day."

Only once he mentioned Schonberg; and the remark stuck in Derek's mind. "Seen Avonleigh Hospital yet?" he asked; and Derek said "No." "Well — you should. My friend Schonberg says it's A1. He's a wonderful man. No end to his activities; and if a thing happens to catch his fancy, he'll spend money like water."

Derek cursed inwardly and held his tongue. Since he was helpless he preferred to hear no more: and as usual Wynchcombe Friars diverted his thoughts into happier channels.

They were but nine of them, counting the chaplain, in the squat-towered church next morning. Derek, standing beside Mark's wheeled chair — listening to those simple words that hold as much of potential tragedy as blessedness — was poignantly reminded of his own sensations less than a year ago; and beneath the grave exaltation of his friend's aspect, he could detect underlying strain. They had sat late together overnight, and Mark had hinted at the qualms that beset him afresh on the verge of the irrevocable. Derek had retorted that qualms implied lack of faith in Sheila; which potent argument — he hoped and believed — had laid them to rest for good.

The service was of the simplest and briefest: one hymn, no address; and in place of Mendelssohn's hackneyed strains, the solemn beauty of Mozart's 'Gloria in Excelsis.' For this was no ordinary union. There were spiritual forces behind it that are rarely present at the usual give and take of marriage vows. And Sheila bore herself queenly as she walked down the empty church by Mark's chair; very slender, very erect; a hand slipped through his arm. For a brief instant, Derek encountered her eyes; and the look in them, at once proud and tender and uplifted, brought a lump into his throat.

The moment of parting was overshadowed by the knowledge that they could not meet again before Derek went to France. But though all were acutely aware of that fact, no word was said to mar the high serenity of Mark's Great Occasion —

It was early in June that Jack dashed home on ninety-six hours' leave. The greater part of it he spent with his father; but the final twenty-four hours were given to Derek — and Town. They were gone in no time — a breathless, restless rush: Jack in high health and spirits, and very learned on the subject of bombs, that — like every other fresh development — were the destined heralds of victory. After supper, in their hotel bedroom, they fell into a graver vein of talk; but on the whole they maintained a resolute cheerfulness, even through those last ten minutes on the platform — the severest test of all.

"Now I've got my hand in, you bet the Boches will begin to sit up and take notice!" said Jack from the carriage window. "Likewise, you and the old man will be hearing of me presently!"

And it was so.

A bare three weeks after their parting, they heard of him. Derek, opening an innocent looking letter from Randchester, found within it the message that ended all.

The Secretary for War regretted to report Captain John Burlton's gallant death in action, killed by a bomb: — and Derek sat staring stupidly at the words, hardly aware of the tears that crowded into his eyes. . . .

Later on, when the truth had penetrated, he achieved some sort of a letter to the 'old man.' Comfortable condolences did not flow readily from his pen, and for him the unbehoden was not 'a sure and certain hope.' Jacko was gone — dead upon the field of honour. The world would not know his happy, simple-hearted presence any more. And suddenly Derek thought of Gabrielle de Vigne, with her "Jacko, you're superfluous!" and the mother tenderness in her eyes. . . .

And again, later on, details were forthcoming. Jack had been at work with a party of his section, when a bomb fell into the trench; and without a second's hesitation, he had flung himself upon the deadly thing — had saved the lives of his men at the cost of his own —

Later on still, they heard that his name had been sent up for

a posthumous V.C. How proud and delighted he would have been had he earned it — living! And Derek caught himself wondering if he knew —

While the first bewildering sense of loss was fresh upon him, came orders for embarkation; and he was thankful they left small margin for farewells. He had heard men say they could stick anything except the look on the faces of the women when the final wrench came. Besides — it would be very bad for his mother. He would dearly love to see her again, but he would rather not say good-bye to any of them — even Van. Writing it proved quite difficult enough.

Then there was the personal pang of leaving England in the high tide of summer; a flush of rose madder on her awakening moors; poppies aflame in her standing corn. Three years ago he had left her in order to know more of her; and that fuller understanding eased, a little, the wrench of leaving her now, when one had to face the fact that there might be no return.

Derek was no soldier by temperament; but the loss of Jack and his deep-seated antagonism to the soul of modern Germany had given him a measure of the true battle spirit — very rare among Englishmen; the burning sense of terrible wrongs that must be terribly avenged: — not merely the one life dear to him, nor even the thousands of other lives, broken and brutally extinguished; but the calculated murder of things spiritual — the truth and beauty and decency of man's human estate — lacking which, he is even less than the beasts that perish.

The stress of these half articulate emotions made Derek peculiarly thankful for the secret and very prosaic manner of their going. No martial music to stir or harrow them; not a cheer, as the packed train slid out of the station; not a soul, save a few indifferent dockers, to watch them stream over the gangway on to the grey merchant liner that had never borne prouder loads than those stubborn, cheerful, self-dedicated men. Yet they talked no patriotics. They seemed blind to any spark of romance or heroism in their great adventure; and they were a good deal more concerned about sea-sickness than about submarines.

Only the purring of engines told them they were off: and as they thronged the taffrail, taking their last look at England, a procession of coal barges, like an ink stain on the dusk, moved some wag at Derek's elbow to sing out lustily: "*Keep* the home fires burning, matey. That's your job. We've bloomin' well got ours."

At once a score of voices took up the familiar chorus. And so singing, they slipped away into the heart of darkness, a guardian destroyer on either hand. . . .

CHAPTER VI

Almost, thou persuadest me . . .

ACTS XXVI, 28.

VAN, left behind in England, was considerably annoyed that Derek should have slipped off across the Channel without making an effort to see him again. It struck him as amazingly inconsiderate and unfeeling; in brief, Dirks all over. It was a curious and persistent fact — sharply emphasizing their essential unlikeness — that whenever Derek's misdemeanours happened to spring from excess of feeling, Van never, by any chance, suspected the fact. But his fleeting annoyance was soon displaced by a vague anxiety, which he discouraged to the best of his ability.

Derek, himself, unconsciously assisted the process. His letters were few and brief; barren of detail, but cheerful on the whole. He earned rapid promotion to the rank of Sergeant; and he could have had a commission for the asking; but preferred, inexplicably, to remain an N.C.O. Van had never discovered — nor ever would — the clue to his chronically unaccountable thoughts and ways.

At home, the uneventful summer of 1915 passed pleasantly enough. The Coalition compromise and a revolution in the supply of munitions raised afresh the hopes that had been so rudely dashed after Neuve Chapelle. At the front, it seemed, there was "nothing doing"; and they all became gradually inured to the fact that Derek was 'out there.' Scores of fellows, Van assured Lady Avonleigh, had come through everything, even the hell of that early fighting, without a scratch —

And all the while, in France, events were working up to a fresh bid for Lille; and, with the passing of summer, the Loos

sector came violently to life. Derek, they knew, was there or thereabouts. He had promised Van, in the event of a 'big push,' to despatch a field postcard at the first possible moment. But a week passed; and the hope of decisive victory dwindled; and never a line from him.

In all the days of his untroubled life Van had not known an hour's acute anxiety except about money. His earlier tweaks were child's play to this vague, persistent ache, this mental restlessness that would not be stilled; and the look of strained expectancy in his mother's eyes was very hard to bear. For the moment he was living at Avonleigh House. He knew it comforted her; and mutual anxiety had drawn them closer together. They remarked that he was careless; that the card might have been delayed; while each read the secret fear in the other's eyes. If he were a casualty, they would get no telegram, because he was in the ranks; and Van — who had friends at Court — besieged the War Office, without avail.

At last — when hope had almost flickered out — came the official intimation that Sergeant the Honourable Derek Blount had been gassed and dangerously wounded in the first day's fighting. Van took the horrid thing straight to his mother: and, standing together on the hearthrug, they read it over and over — recalling hideous details heard in the days of Ypres —

Then Van remarked in a queer contained voice: "And while this illuminating information has been trickling through, God knows — "

Lady Avonleigh shivered; and he put his arm round her. "Hold up, dear," he said, and kissed her with unusual tenderness. "We shall be honoured with details from some confounded official soon."

And this time they were not kept waiting long.

Next morning he came down late, as usual, to find beside his plate a brief urgent letter from the doctor in charge of a hospital at Rouen:

Your brother, I deeply regret to say, is in a critical condition. Besides being badly gassed, he has a severe wound in the groin and a

slight head wound. What went wrong with his gas-mask he is not in a condition to explain. Should you be able to come over and see him, it would be well to lose no time. I wish I could write more hopefully, but it is imperative that you should know the truth.

Van could feel, while he read, the mute question in his mother's eyes, in the tense stillness of her whole attitude.

"Not the worst, dear," he said quietly, handing her the letter; and she read it slowly, with compressed lips. Then, for one strained moment, they confronted each other in silence.

"You ought . . . to start at once?" Lady Avonleigh said. The remark hovered between a statement and a question.

Van nodded and mechanically sipped his tea.

"Oh! it's dreadful!" she breathed. "Father ought to be here."

"I wish to God he was!" Van agreed with unwonted fervour — and there was another strained pause. "Of course — if one could be sure of seeing Derek . . . if it would really give him any pleasure — but if . . ." Van hesitated painfully. "There does seem to be a ghost of a chance. So — one must just face things — and go."

His voice had the same tentative note as her own; and suddenly he felt that, somewhere, all this had happened before. It was their talk about India, with the positions reversed.

"Yes, dear — of course you must go," she said with gentle decision.

"But I don't half like leaving you, unless — This is two days old. I think — I'll wire."

"Yes — wire." Something in her tone, and the knowledge that she would understand, prompted him to add: "Frankly, Mother . . . I hate going —"

"My dear, I hate it too. I shan't have a moment's peace till you're home again. But . . . poor Derek . . . poor darling! If only *I* was stronger!"

"*You?*" The bare suggestion showed him that the depths of her motherhood were stirred; and it cleared the air of indecision.

But the final word was with the Rouen telegram:

Condition about the same. Come at once.

It was late on the next afternoon when — for the first time in his life — Van entered a hospital ward and followed a fresh-coloured Sister between rows of spotless beds, each with its broken occupant decently bandaged and very still.

On arrival, he had heard, with intense relief, that Derek was through the worst.

"These are the times when a clean life tells," the doctor had said gravely. "It will be a slow business, but the chances are in his favour."

Van had wired the good news to his mother: and now . . .

The Sister halted at last by one of the beds.

"This," she said, "is Sergeant Blount."

And Van stood speechless, looking down upon the travesty of Derek that lay there, with closed eyes, more like death than life, except for the laboured, uneven breathing, that produced a curious catch in his own throat.

Derek's head was closely bandaged. The healthy tan of his skin had faded to a grey pallor. His lips were set and strained. A cage over his wound made an unnatural bulge under the bed-clothes, and one thin hand gripped the edge of the sheet.

Van was aware of his own heart beating unevenly, and a strange chill of repulsion ran through him. That horrid apparition was not Dirks. He could feel no vital link with it; no warmth of affection . . .

The Sister, seeing that her patient was not asleep, touched his shoulder.

"Sergeant," she said, "your brother is here." And the apparition opened its eyes. They at least were unchanged. Their clear sea-tint was not dimmed; and the soul of Derek looked out of them; — dazed at first, then with a swift gleam of recognition.

"Van!" he whispered, on a sharp indrawn breath — and Van was himself again.

The Sister set a chair and a screen near the bed, to give them a small measure of privacy; and Van was glad of it. For though Derek could scarcely speak, he did not release his brother's hand. He clung to it as a child clings to something familiar

after a nerve-shaking nightmare; and the thing was so unlike Derek that it moved Van as he was rarely moved. It dissolved the last morsel of antagonism that had lurked in his heart ever since their clash at Avonleigh.

"Mother?" Derek whispered: and Van told him how plucky she had been; how she had wanted to come herself; how 'good old Con' had wept and sent endless messages; gave him the latest news from India; and, when their brief time together was ended, said cheerfully: "We'll be having you at Avonleigh when you're properly on the up-grade."

Derek shook his head and made the sign of the Sergeant's stripes on his sleeve.

"No matter. We can fix up a commission and square it that way!"

Derek smiled; but his head-shake, though cautious, was even more decisive; and Van understood.

"You *are* an obstinate beggar, Dirks, even at the last gasp! Shows you've some kick left in you, anyhow; and I could take no better news back to them all. See you again before I leave—"

So they parted; and Van was not sorry to escape from that temple of pain. The presence of all those silent, suffering men moved him to more than discomfort. They made him feel, for the first time, vaguely ashamed —

In the corridor his guide remarked: "There's a Sergeant Gosling in your brother's regiment, who said he would like to see you."

"Why, of course," said Van, politely acquiescent, though a trifle bored.

He found Bert among the lesser casualties, with a damaged leg, which he was not to lose.

"Excuse me troublin' you, sir," he said as they shook hands. "But I thought you might like to hear how Mr. Derek come by that dose o' good British gas. If I know him he'll git sayin' 'e mislaid his 'elmet."

"He's not fit to say even that much, yet. What happened?"

"Well, 'twas one of our corporals did the mislayin'. A jumpy

little chap. Bag o' nerves. Jus' the last moment, couldn't find his bloomin' 'elmet nowhere. An' Mr. Derek saw the funk 'e was in, between the gas an' the penalty for 'is carelessness. 'You take this, Finch,' he says, 'I got a extry one.' An' Finch, he took it like winkin'. 'Les' see your extry one,' I said, when he was gone, an' Mr. Derek give me one of his looks. Then I knew: an' I let out — I did. But you don't get no change out o' him. 'You shut your mouth, Bert,' he said. 'Tain't pleasant to be in a funk. Likely I'll find one somewhere.' But the gas found him first. God A'mighty! — *ef* you'd 'a' seen him, sir!"

"Thank God I didn't!" retorted Van with such pious gratitude that Bert's green eye twinkled. The Goslings, as a family, were not partial to Van.

"Guess it would 'a' turned you clean inside out, sir," he said quietly. "But over 'ere we got to put up with such little inconveniences."

"And to balance them," quoth Van, unperturbed, "you monopolize all the glory that's going. Thank you for telling me about Mr. Derek. And good luck to your leg."

Bert's tale — which he did not mention to Derek next morning — haunted him on the journey back to Boulogne. It deepened the disturbing effect of his first real contact with this War that was being so indomitably waged by men of like frailties and reluctances as himself; men who loved life and sunshine and women, and enjoyed a good dinner, even as he did; and had yet put all those loves behind them for — the sort of thing he had seen and heard of in the last thirty-six hours. Look at Derek — keen as mustard to stay in Bombay as his father's Private Secretary; yet he had come on home and joined up as a matter of course; and, equally as a matter of course, he had taken his chance of a hideous death because a fellow soldier had lost his gas helmet and funk'd the consequences.

Before he reached Boulogne, Van was persuaded — very nearly — that his important niche in the Foreign Office could, at a pinch, be filled by an older man. Even so — what of his mother? Bereft of her husband, she seemed to lean more and more on him, these days. And again — what of Avonleigh?

Though he did not exert himself unduly in that direction, he was by no means prepared to leave Schonberg in command of the ship. For these important considerations he felt distinctly grateful: but there remained the worrying under-sense of a supreme personal obligation unfulfilled —

His father's significant silence on the subject bothered him: and he had not even the tragic excuse of personal cowardice to condone his persistent hanging back. The sheer discomfort of the whole thing loomed larger than the danger; and yet —

The trouble with Van was that he owned a conscience — of a sort; and, at times, between the conscience that objected to argument by slaughter, and the conscience that protested against saving one's skin by proxy, he suffered enough genuine discomfort to feel he was at least *enduring* his share of the great upheaval, if no more.

On the homeward boat, his thoughts were given a still more uncomfortable turn by a snatch of talk overheard in the street. Passing close by a cartload of battle wrack, outside one of the hospitals, the guttural under-tones of two wounded Germans had caught his ear. The men were discussing the changed aspect of Boulogne; frankly congratulating themselves on having "made to sweat a little those *verfluchte* English."

They were the first German voices he had heard in France: and — fresh from the sight of Dirks, tortured into a travesty of himself — they stirred in him those very ungentlemanly sensations that certain of his own official colleagues so constantly deplored. Worse still, they unpleasantly recalled the voices of men who were his confidential friends. For the moment, he marvelled at himself and heartily confounded them all. Even Schonberg was not exempt from his sharp revulsion of feeling —

Leaning on the taffrail — idly watching the vessel's creamy track merge and dwindle and disappear — he fell to wondering whether Derek was so entirely in the wrong after all. That obstinate head-shake, in response to his own natural suggestion about Avonleigh, was more impressive — when you came to think of it — than his windy talk about hidden influences and

Germans abroad. He was a consistent beggar, was Dirks. Nothing, it seemed, would induce him to come near the place while the Schonberg connection lasted. Yet in his secretive fashion, he probably loved Avonleigh, and all it stood for, better than anything on earth. So did Van, if it came to that. But one had to recognize that there were other considerations, other loves. Compromise was the essence of life. A man in *his* position couldn't run it on unadulterated principles and emotions. All very well for a second son —

And in the same breath he recalled his father, who had somehow succeeded in filling a great position, without 'nailing his colours to the weathercock' — a favourite aphorism — or sacrificing the greater love to the less. Too clearly for his comfort, Van remembered their last talk in the library, when Avonleigh and its mistress had been gravely committed to his charge.

"My work out there will absorb all my energies. Over here, I shall rely on *you*." Those had been his father's last words: and he had acted up to them. He didn't half like this Avonleigh business. Yet he had simply written: "If Avonleigh is really needed, use it. You are on the spot — do what you think fit." And he himself — by way of response to that tacit appeal — had simply done what Schonberg thought fit from first to last.

What the deuce would his father say if he ever heard all — which God forbid? And why did he — Van — so often feel a mere thing of putty in Schonberg's clumsy yet unerring fingers? He could swear he had never intended to borrow money of the man; nor could he, even now, tell exactly how the thing had first come about. Some momentary embarrassment; Schonberg, half sympathetic, half jocose, insinuating a casual hint about 'agreement between friends'; and somehow Van had been made to feel as if he were rendering a service instead of accepting one. But still — every now and then, some unexpected look or word, the disconcerting way he opened his eyes all of a sudden, produced a vaguely unpleasant jar. If he could only get quit of the money obligations, the position would be less

irksome. In fact, he must, imperatively, get clear somehow, before his own father returned. A thumping good marriage would be about the ticket. The charming Cynthia had advantages: but she also had drawbacks. And there were scores of others in the market. He must keep his eyes open. Have a good look round . . .

It was at this point that the talk of two men, standing almost at his elbow, fairly thrust itself upon his attention. The nearest one was describing a girl he had met at the Hotel Meurice.

"Not exactly pretty, y' know; but simply ripping. Topping figure, topping eyes. And I'm told there's money—quite a good little bit. Look, there she is, coming out of the companion. Ripping profile — what?"

Van turned instinctively, as if the remarks had been addressed to himself, and discovered that the owner of the topping figure and the ripping profile was a girl in V.A.D. uniform. Bad luck that the topping figure was hidden under her cloak. But the man of one adjective was jolly well right about her eyes; and her whole aspect had an indefinable air of distinction that pleased his critical taste.

Curiously enough, he seemed to know her. Somewhere, before, he had seen those remarkable eyes and brows and the quick turn of her head, as she turned to speak to her friend.

The friend solved the problem. "Honor Lenox, by Jove!" said Van to himself. "And the charmer must be old Burlton's stepdaughter, Gabrielle de Vigne."

Decidedly she had 'come on' since the year of her début, — when he had danced with her and Sheila at the Melrose entertainments; and he felt very much in the mood, just then, for renewing his acquaintance with an attractive girl, whose 'good little bit' of money was not the least of her charms.

At that moment, Honor caught sight of him; and, raising his cap, he gladly joined them and explained his errand. Her surprise at finding him on a Channel boat annoyed him considerably: but talk of Derek, and their concern over his news, eclipsed all minor matters.

Miss de Vigne said little; only her sensitive eyebrows registered the quick play of thought and feeling within. Yes, she remembered dancing with him that season and the next. It was odd they had not met since; but she was no Londoner.

"And now —" she paused a fraction of a second. "You are prevented from taking part in this great struggle? But what a pity!"

Van agreed that it was very bad luck; and, to escape further awkwardness, questioned them about their own doings, their present destination.

"We're both going back to enjoy a breath of Home," Miss de Vigne told him. "My stepfather wants me badly. And, afterwards, we've promised to help Mark and Sheila — have you heard?"

He had not heard. He took small interest in Wynchcombe Friars and its vagaries. The 'Forsyth crew' were too strenuous, too artistic for his taste. But, since he quite intended to see more of Miss de Vigne, he welcomed further information.

"They're going to fit up the house," she went on, "as a small Auxiliary Hospital. They hope to manage about twenty men. Honor and Sheila will do the massage. I am to run the commissariat and look after the wards. Quartermaster, in fact!"

"A very modest part!" He would have added a trite compliment about wasting her sweetness; but instinct warned him that small change of that sort might not be acceptable. "I'll come and look you up when you're settled in, just to see how brilliantly you play the violet! I mostly use my car for convalescents. So I can run down, week-ends, and give Forsyth's lot an occasional airing."

His glance implied more, but she missed it. She was looking out to sea. "That would be delightful," she said; and added irrelevantly that the Macnairs had taken a house at Hendon. "He's started flying. Isn't he wonderful?"

"Foolhardy, I should call it," Van replied coolly. He was constantly being rubbed up by the way in which these superfluous elderly people flaunted their excessive energy in the faces of younger men — no less usefully employed.

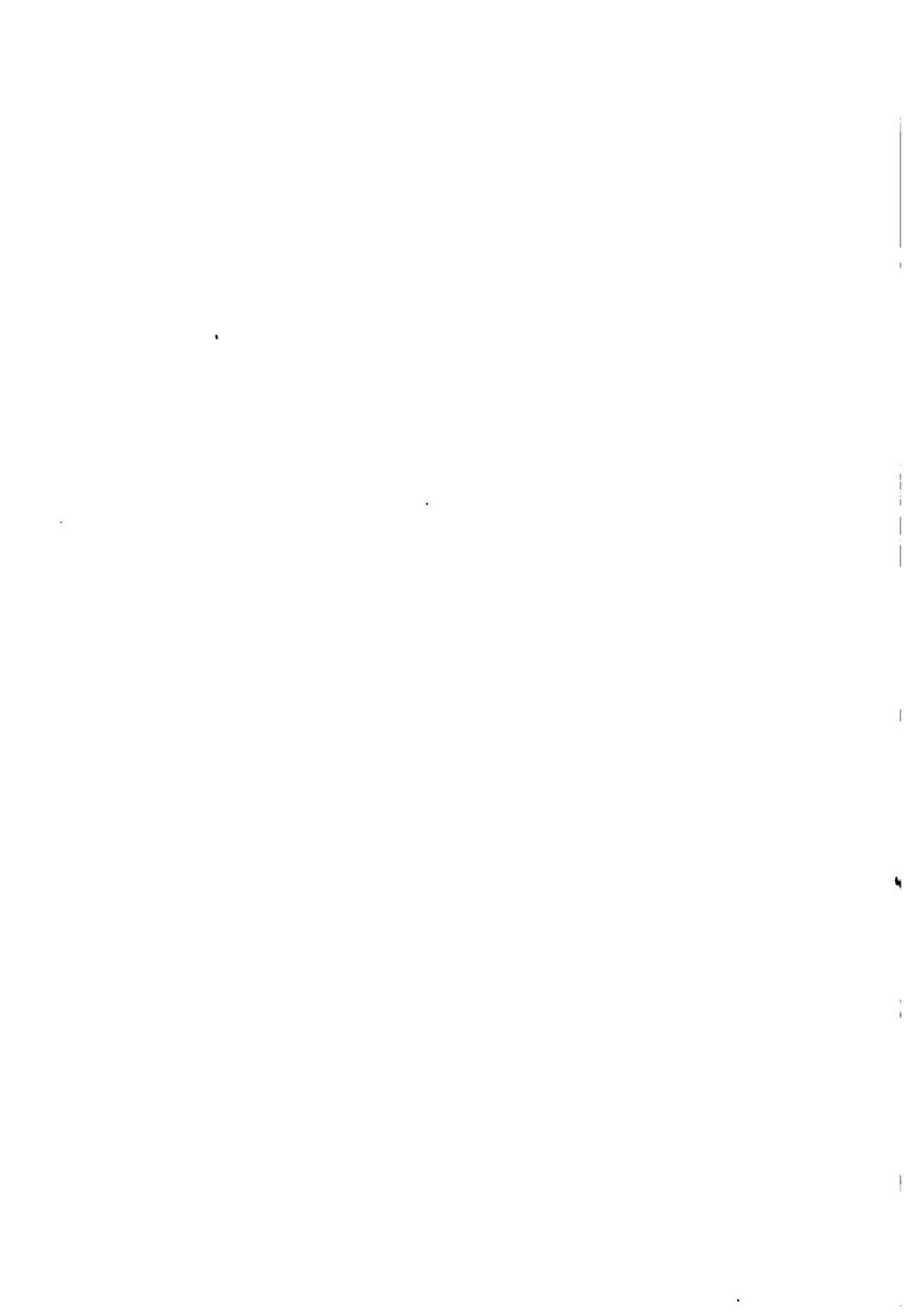
Miss de Vigne glanced at him to see whether he was joking. "If our race was not rich in that kind of foolhardiness," she said quietly, "I wonder where we should be now?"

He saw he had made a false step and retracted it gracefully. "My mistake! I only meant . . . at Macnair's age. . . . But that, after all, is more a matter of temperament than of anno domini." And he unobtrusively changed the subject.

He remained with the two girls throughout the voyage; travelled up to town with them; saw Miss de Vigne into the train for Hendon, where she was staying the night; and drove back to Avonleigh House feeling better satisfied all round than he had done for some time. His painful and reluctant journey to Rouen had unexpectedly opened the door to agreeable possibilities. And he intended to keep the door open, even if he took his time about going through —

END OF BOOK IV

BOOK V
HANDMAID OF THE GODS



BOOK V HANDMAID OF THE GODS

CHAPTER I

*We are but warriors for the working day
But, by the mass, our hearts are in the trim.*

SHAKESPEARE

THE library at Wynchcombe Friars scarcely knew itself under the altered régime. There, where Keith had worked peacefully at his book, men in hospital blue and scarlet ties lounged, very much at ease, reading cheap literature or playing cards, till the nine o'clock gong sent them trooping off to bed. And there, on an evening of early April, Mark and Derek sat smoking in great contentment, because the Authorities — importuned by Mark — had mercifully not been moved to disappoint them of their hope.

Early that afternoon, Derek had been added to the Forsyth convalescent colony; and, judging from his general condition, he would not soon be moved on elsewhere. His unauthorized dose of gas had set up obstinate gastric and lung troubles; and the wound in his groin had proved a troublesome affair, slow to heal, quick to inflame. Finally, X-rays revealed that a fragment of metal had worked its way into his body; and as it shifted continually, its removal had at first seemed a doubtful possibility.

After Van's visit to Rouen, there had been a serious relapse; and, on recovery, Derek had been detailed for the Riviera on account of his lungs. There, in a great hotel hospital, at the edge of the Mediterranean, he had slowly drifted back to life and comparative health; and there, at long last, the wandering scrap of German metal had been captured, extracted, and sent

to India, at Lord Avonleigh's particular request. By that time, the hapless Derek was sick to the soul of operating tables, the smell of iodoform, and the whole colourless routine of hospital life. Even now, the impress of it was on him still — the blue suit and the hated scarlet tie.

It was just after nine o'clock; but when Sister Barton summoned her charges, Mark's eye had signalled "Wait a bit," and Derek had lagged behind willingly enough. The library, in its new character, contained five card tables adorned with ash trays and stumps of cigarettes. The desk, sacred to Keith's labours, served for fitful scrawls to sweethearts and wives; and on the top of it waved the brazen horn of a gramophone.

But the most notable change was in Mark himself. Bronzed and vigorous looking, he lay back in his leather chair. Two stout, crutch-handled sticks were all the support he needed now on the flat; and in time things might be better still. Close to his feet lay the faithful 'Bobs,' using his master's boot for a chin-rest, and casting a puzzled, affectionate eye on his old friend Derek, with the right voice and the wrong clothes; a woefully changed Derek, his healthy outdoor aspect clean gone. War and suffering had chiselled his face a shade too sharply; and his eyes seemed to have retreated deeper into his head; but in them the light of his spirit burned with a clear, still flame.

"The chaps who tumble into these quarters between hospital and Command dépôt are damned lucky beggars," he announced, with a sigh of content; and Mark's smile signified approval.

"They seem happy enough and we love having them. Your charming brother's been quite zealous lately about turning up and spinning them round the country; though I doubt if it amuses him — or them. He's coming again on Saturday. You're the excuse *this* time, I suppose!"

"What d'you mean by that?"

A faint challenge lurked in Derek's tone.

"Has he never spoken to you about — Gay?"

"Now and then. He seems to admire her."

"Precisely. I'm half afraid — he means to annex her."

"Well — why not?"

The gleam in Derek's eyes made Mark lean forward and pat his knee. "Steady on, old bird! You know I've never pretended to like Van. We're oil and water — we don't mix. He's all very well in his own line. Let him stick to it. Gay isn't his line. If you knew her as well as we do, you'd understand. Your precious Van isn't fit to tie her shoe lace."

"That could be said of a good few lovers and husbands."

"It could. *But* — there are degrees of unfitness —"

"See here, Mark," Derek took him up sharply. "No one sees Van's faults plainer than I do. But he has his good points — and a wife like that might be the making of him, if he cares —"

"Quite so. But he's not in love, if *I* know anything of the symptoms. And Gay's a woman, not a pleasing appendage to a bank account. She ought to have the real big thing."

Derek gravely inclined his head. "Do you imagine — *she* cares?"

"Well — she doesn't seem to discourage him and she's no coquette. Sheila ventured a few remarks the other day; and Gay was quite sweet about it, but quite inscrutable. Wait till you see them together, and just take notice. Of course, if she's misguided enough to be smitten —"

Derek silenced him with a gesture. "Let be. If you can't bridle your tongue, your religion is vain; and I'll apply to be lodged elsewhere —!"

He was interrupted by the entrance of Sheila.

"Sister wants to know what's become of Sergeant Blount!" she said — very demure and charming in her blue uniform; and her smile passed from Derek to Mark. "The Commandant will have to keep his favouritism within bounds!"

"Favouritism? We'd almost come to blows. Derek's going to apply for an exchange."

"Oh, dry up!" Derek rose and limped towards the door. But Sheila laid a hand on his arm.

"Has he been *very* unspeakable? He's getting so fearfully well, these days, there's no holding him."

Mark, who had swung himself up with the help of his sticks, smiled down on them both, cheerfully impenitent; and Sheila's eyes lingered on him with the same mingling of pride and tenderness that had struck at Derek's heart on their wedding day. But the underlying pathos was gone.

"Dear, you *must* come now. The men are in great spirits. They've got up a guard of honour to receive you!"

The guard of honour, in grey regulation sleeping-suits and regulation slippers, was drawn up near the door of the main ward that had once been the billiard room. It was armed with whistles, mouth organs, and a concertina, crutches for trombones, and the horn of a wrecked gramophone. It greeted its Commandant with a brave discord of squealings and thrumming, whence presently emerged the cheerful strains of 'Bonnie Dundee': and Derek, suddenly beset with shyness, hurried down the oak-panelled room to his own bed, and carried off his sleeping-suit to the corrugated iron wash house.

Returning later, he found the guard of honour dissolved into human fragments that were playing the fool assiduously, for their own edification. In his own corner, one Corporal Cummins — with the sorrowful eyes and loose mouth of the born low comedian — was solemnly, drunkenly, trying to gather up his cast-off garments; shedding a fresh one each time he stooped to rescue the lost sheep; and regarding it with a gaze of portentous reproachfulness as he lunged afresh with precisely the same result. The creature was perfectly happy, though no one seemed even to notice him, except Derek — and Bobs, who made unheeded overtures to flirtation by capturing a sock.

The main group had gathered round the great tiled fireplace, where Sister Barton and Sheila were dispensing nightly doses, while the rest scrambled into bed; and Derek thankfully followed suit. He felt too new and too shy to join the group by the fire or to take part in the chaff that flowed freely while the men waited for their dole of milk and cake.

Cummins — having rescued his last least garment and stolen a covert coat — was now engaged in apeing the doctor from Winchester. Armed with a bath thermometer and a brass

candlestick, he gravely explored lungs, tested temperatures, and wrote out farcical prescriptions to the huge delight of his uncritical audience, who could not succeed in upsetting his gravity, chaff they never so wildly.

And Derek — looking on from his corner — had a sudden vision of bedtime in the trenches — rats and lice and the nightly dose of ‘Hate’ from over the way; living and dead and dying so hideously intermingled that the strongest nerves were strained to breaking-point; and there, as here, the lambent flame of humour playing over all: there, as here, jokes, even of the fourth magnitude, greeted with gusts of Homeric laughter. And while a man can laugh in that key his sanity is secure.

Suddenly he sighted, afar off, his hostess of Silversands, in Breton cap and blue uniform, dispensing supper to a dozen hungry men. He had not seen her since his arrival; and it annoyed him to feel so acutely at a disadvantage in greeting a girl who was more than an acquaintance, yet scarcely a friend. He compromised matters by a shy salute as she came towards him.

“Mark told me you had come, and I was delighted,” she said with her smiling directness. “I’m rather in the background on cake-making afternoons.”

Her voice, with its faintly crisp intonation and the expressive play of her brows, awoke vivid memories of Silversands and Jack and Lois; but at the moment, Mark’s talk of Van was uppermost in his mind.

“You don’t look the same man,” she added, with a troubled air of concern. “You must have had a horrid time.”

“Pretty bad,” he admitted; and she smiled at the flagrant under-statement. “A treat compared with what some fellows have had to stick. And after all I’ve come through it — more or less.”

“Yes: — that’s the supreme achievement. And it will be more, not less, before we’ve done with you! But I’m on duty; and I mustn’t stay talking now — Good-night.”

He saluted again and watched her thoughtfully as she crossed over to the opposite bed.

He was still thinking of her chiefly in connection with Van. He was even admitting that Mark had a fraction of right on his side. Dispassionately considered, she was not exactly in Van's line. But if he really cared and succeeded in winning her, well — it would be just like his luck.

CHAPTER II

*A face that's best
By its own beauty drest,
And can alone commend the rest.*

*A heart,
For whose, more noble smart,
Love may be long choosing a dart.*

RICHARD CRASHAW

As for Van — entrenched in his comfortable London quarters — he was distinctly pleased with Fate, in the person of Mark, for depositing Derek at Wynchcombe Friars. He could now be as zealous as he chose in ministering to Forsyth's convalescents, without prematurely compromising either himself or Miss de Vigne; and Van was a very Peer Gynt in his reluctance to burn boats, or close the convenient doorway of retreat.

Mark had made a fair shot at the truth. Gabrielle de Vigne — as a girl with her head on her shoulders and money in her purse — was very much 'in the running' as the prospective Lady Avonleigh; and the fact that she was difficult of access tended to raise her value in the eyes of an 'eligible' surfeited with the too coming-on disposition of the modern society girl. Her light, unassailable dignity made a man feel absurdly flattered by her least concessions. Too lazy to rise above the levels, he could, and did, appreciate, up to a point, the 'style and manners of the sky.' He knew her capable; had heard of her as clever; a linguist, with a taste for serious reading. But at least she had the tact not to flourish her intellect in a man's face; and the play of it under the surface enhanced her quality and her charm. The lively Cynthia was better company and better dowered; but, indirectly, he had gathered that she was shrewd and a little difficult about her money; though appar-

ently willing to spend it like water in the Allied cause. At present she was running a refreshment hut in Boulogne; and over the uncaptured kingdom of Van's heart, Gabrielle de Vigne reigned in her stead.

But, first, he must see and know more of the lady; to which end Dirks might contribute involuntary help. It was a bit of a drawback that the pursuit of closer intimacy involved much motoring round Hampshire with wounded soldiers. The best of good fellows, of course. In theory, one could not do enough for them. But, conversationally, a bit heavy in hand. At all events, they had the merit of never pulling long faces over the War and giving a man the blues. He, too, had the merit — or rather the grace — to know himself a secondary consideration in Miss de Vigne's eyes, where they were concerned. Now and then he had ventured to chaff her about it, for the pure pleasure of getting a rise out of her, and seeing her face kindle with genuine feeling.

But, in serious moods, he instinctively played up to her points of view; above all as regards his lamentable failure to appear in khaki, as to which he still suffered occasional qualms. It was so fast becoming the only wear, that there were moments when a man in plain clothes had an awkward sense of being out of it. Yet — in the very hidden place, where Van was sometimes honest with himself — he knew well enough that he would sooner be 'out of it,' over here, than 'in it' over there: and, because he was secretly grateful to the 'Government umbrella,' that catch phrase was apt to touch him on the raw. But at present the whole matter could be dismissed as a side issue so long as it did not affect Miss de Vigne.

On Friday he motored down into Hampshire feeling unusually keen for a sight of her. He would try and persuade her to join his party; and if it came off — well, he would count it a good omen.

It was one of those rare April days that are a heavenly foretaste of June, yet retain the hidden reserves of beauty, the veiled promise of spring; and its effect on Van was to make him

wish all wounded soldiers at Jericho. If only he could carry off Miss de Vigne, alone, for an hour's spin — and chance the outcome! But he was too innately a connoisseur of the emotions to rush his fences. Also, she would be pretty sure to refuse the invitation.

As he swung round the final curve of the drive, he caught sight of her, coming up from the great pine wood with half a dozen men in blue and grey: Derek among them, limping badly with a stick in place of the detested crutches.

When the car drew up they shouted 'Cheero!' and waved their caps; but only Derek came forward.

"Good old Van — playing the giddy war worker! Going to give this poor cripple a lift in your Rolls-Royce?"

"That *was* the ideal!" Van's smile passed beyond him: and to Gabrielle he lifted his cap, as he sprang out of the car. "Won't *you* come along too, Miss de Vigne?" he asked when they joined the group. "It's a ripping day. With a bit of a squeeze I could take the lot."

"Very kind!" she said with a glance of approval, "but I'm afraid not all of us are takeable."

"*We're* gyme, anyway," remarked the cockney, who was Derek's ward neighbour: and they moved on to the house, leaving Gabrielle and Van together under the almond tree.

Van had a moment of awkwardness: proof that he was more deeply involved than he knew.

"Ripping day," he said again. One had to make a start somehow; and spring at her loveliest, justified the fatuous repetition. "I'm getting no end keen on driving these cheery fellows round the country."

"They are a specially nice lot," she said simply. "And goodness knows it's a privilege to do anything for them."

"It's *you* that makes one feel it so. Your own keenness is infectious."

A pause. No use trying to convey wordless messages. Her eyes were resting on the blue distance beyond a dip in the ridge. His own dwelt a moment on the alluring curves of her figure — supple without undue slenderness — and on the profile view

that he had of her face: the straight nose with its sensitive nostril, the slightly full underlip and the dent of common sense above the rounded, resolute chin: the whole imbued with the light alertness of spirit that was her peculiar charm. Her silence piqued him; and he waxed bolder still.

"Miss de Vigne, won't you do us all a big favour this once, and come along, too?"

She turned to him with her frank smile. "I can't — honestly I'm sorry."

He did not conceal his disappointment. "What's the mysterious difficulty? Do you ever say 'Yes' inadvertently? Or am I peculiarly singled out for the answer in the negative?"

"I'm afraid I must have notice of that question!" she parried lightly. "This is my baking afternoon. My cakes are rather a speciality and the men love them. That solves the mystery of one negative."

"Bad luck! Wish I could stay and sample them. But you might sometimes take a day off. How about the dire results of all work and no play?"

She drew in her lip. "I'm afraid those of us who have been hit hard — by the War, must accept the risk of becoming 'dull boys.'"

"Miss de Vigne — forgive me!" Van pleaded, genuinely moved. "I never meant anything personal. I'm afraid I was only thinking of myself, and the pleasure I lose by your devotion to duty."

"But — there's truth in it. One is thankful for work that really needs doing; and one lacks — the holiday mood. So you must forgive! My dear *poilus* in the Paris hospital seemed to understand I was passing through the shadow. I found they had a name for me among themselves —" She hesitated.

"Madonna of all the Mercies?" Van asked softly—and she caught her breath.

"No — '*la jeune fille stricuse.*'"

"Charming! Fits you to perfection. But I hope it won't fit you always: and I think — I like my own shot best."

"Yours! Where did you get it from?"

"Out of my head. A flash of inspiration. It seemed—appropriate."

"To a disagreeable person who says 'No' on principle?"

"Not at all. To one of the kindest and most charming women I've ever met."

His tone carried conviction, and it pleased him to see the colour deepen in her cheeks. The slow blush was his only answer: and he added gently: "Please don't think me presumptuous. I'm not talking polite drivell. I'm only trying, rather rottenly, to express my feeling of something different about you that, after all, can't be expressed. It's unseizable; a quality — an atmosphere — your Frenchness, perhaps —"

She turned to him now without a shade of embarrassment. "Is it so noticeable — my Frenchness?"

"No. That's not the word. It permeates you all through, without making you a shade less English in essence. There — I've hit it rather neatly — what?"

"Though you *said* it couldn't be expressed?" Their eyes met in a friendly amusement that deepened to a friendlier tenderness. "It permeates — that *is* the word. Two years in French Canada and eighteen months out there have made me realize how very much I am two national souls in one body."

"And which has the biggest pull?"

"Honestly, I can't say. And I like the equal balance; especially just now when my two national selves are so splendidly at one. In Paris I found it marvellous. But then — Paris is one of the miracles of the War. Over here — perhaps my eyes are sharpened by absence — but I seem to feel subtle changes creeping into the bones and marrow of England, that are not entirely to the good."

"As how?"

She smiled and shook her head. "Too long a tale! And you would probably disagree. But, to me, the war spirit of *la belle France* seems to burn with a purer flame. Natural, perhaps. Her sacred body is in the grip of the Beast. The more need to keep undimmed her lamp of the spirit. Of course there are still doubtful elements. Politically, she has not yet

found her soul. For that matter — nor has England, nor America. Will they — ever . . .?"

"Oh, Lord, yes," Van assured her, less from conviction than from desire to have done with abstractions. He was far more concerned, just then, with the charms of one woman, than with the spiritual grace of nations. "Leave 'em alone and they'll come home. We small fry can't twist the tails of the great. So — *why worry?*"

At that moment, to his vexation, Mark came along in the wheeled chair, with Derek and four candidates for a drive. Van promptly turned his appearance to account.

"I say, Forsyth, I want Miss de Vigne to come, too," he announced boldly, on the heels of his greeting. "It would do her no end of good. She says she has got to stay and make cakes. Sinful — on a day like this."

"Please note, that's Mr. Blount's version!" Gabrielle struck in with a lift of her head.

Mark was on the point of backing her up, when Derek's eye signalled unofficially: "Give him a chance!" And Mark, even in antagonism, could not be other than human.

"Have a spin by all means, if you feel like it," he said, with a friendly twinkle at Gabrielle. "Blount's right. It isn't a day for the kitchen. I'm for Westover to meet Mother and Keith."

"Come on, Nurse. *Be a sport,*" from the candidates; and from Derek, "I'll knock out if it's too much of a squeeze."

"Rather not," Van retorted in high satisfaction. "You won't say 'No' now, Miss de Vigne? A thumping majority and Commandant's orders."

"I can't," she said very quietly, so that the others, who were talking, did not hear. "You forced my hand."

"Make allowances. Don't spoil it all."

"Of course not. I shall love it. But the end *doesn't* justify the means!"

Then she hurried away into the house, while Van joined the men who were standing round the car.

She sat between the brothers in front. Baird, Cummins, a

soldier mechanic and a pallid boy, recovering from shell shock, were bidden to tumble in behind. "Smoking compartment! Make yourselves at home!" said Van with his kindly, unconscious note of patronage, indicating a flap-pocket full of cigarettes. With grateful murmurs they took him at his word, and the car slid along the drive, out into open country —

It was a day of days on which to roll swiftly and easily past meadows and copes and uplands lightly veiled with new green. Here and there primroses gleamed, and a few deluded butterflies were out. Life resurgent seemed everywhere to defy the lurking shadow of death. Yet, on just such days — was it mere perversity? — that shadow lay heaviest on Gabrielle's heart.

"And out there — !" was the thought that thrust itself darkling between her and the primroses and the butterflies and the dappled sky.

Derek, who suffered from the same form of intrusion, caught the reflection of it in her eyes. Not so Van. Disquieting thoughts, like hawkers and circulars, were not admitted. The passing effect produced on him, by anxiety for Derek and that visit to France, had never been allowed to reassert itself. And to-day — spinning through Hampshire with the girl he had almost decided to marry — his limited cup of content was full.

Between spells of silence, that drifted them miles away from each other, they talked easily and pleasantly of surface things. Gabrielle's interest was centred, at the moment, on an entertainment that Mark and his mother were planning for their little colony. Mrs. Macnair was 'making hay' among distinguished singers and musicians for the first half of the programme; and the second half was to be an informal amateur affair, mainly contributed by the men themselves. Gabrielle, having owned up to a gift for dramatic recitation, was booked for two items; and Van declared that, even if he had to sleep on the terrace or motor back at midnight, he must be there to hear.

"Nothing so desperate, I hope!" she said; and her smile had again the tinge of amusement that piqued him like a challenge.

"I've no doubt Mark could find room for you; especially if you would favour us with an item?"

"Can't be done — worse luck! I'm a duffer in the performing line, but I'm A1 in the auditorium."

"Van can only 'smile and smile and be a villain,'" Derek remarked with his baffling gravity. "And the smiling phase is very becoming."

"You shut up or I'll pitch you into the smoking compartment," Van retorted, not altogether in joke; for the gleam of amusement had deepened in Gabrielle's eyes. "About time you took a turn at the wheel — if you'll guarantee not to upset the apple-cart."

"I won't guarantee anything, but I'm game," said magnanimous Derek; and the exchange was effected, to Van's complete satisfaction. It set him free for more intimate talk; while Derek — competent but unskilled — had to concentrate his attention on the wheel.

Unmistakably, something was up, he decided, and wished Van luck with his venture. Miss de Vigne would be a genuine asset as a member of the family.

By the time they got back, tea on the terrace was in full swing. The Macnairs had arrived for the week-end; and the coming entertainment was the topic of the hour. Gabrielle, with a heightened colour and blown wisps of hair about her temples, looked unmistakably fresher and happier for playing the truant. But the precious cakes were still lurking at the back of her mind; and, in spite of murmured remonstrances from Van, she made short work of her tea. Then she hurried away without vouchsafing him a personal word or parting look.

By way of consolation, he succeeded in securing a bed for the 30th; and thereafter set out upon his long spin to Avonleigh, feeling very well satisfied with himself and the day's achievements.

CHAPTER III

*Heaven's own screen
Hides her soul's purest depths and loveliest glow;
Closely withheld, as all things most unseen:
The wave-bowered pearl, the heart-shaped seal of green
That fleck the snowdrop underneath the snow.*

Rossetti

FOR Derek, that first spell of life at Wynchcombe Friars was a time of blessed tranquillity and well-being, such as he had not known since he sailed from Bombay. With the blossoming of tree and flower, the stir of rising sap in coppice and woodland, he too felt the blood quicken in his body and the thoughts quicken in his brain that had too long lain fallow, through sheer physical weakness and the tyranny of pain. Fate, he whimsically supposed, must have been afflicted with a fit of absent-mindedness when she steered him into the very haven where he would be; where, after months of hospital routine, he could enjoy a whiff of personal liberty — the breath of life. No escape, even here, from rules and regulations; though there were lighter hands on the reins. No escape anywhere from the myrrh and frankincense of the halfpenny press; almost as galling, in its way, to men of certain types — of whom Derek was one, and his cockney neighbour another. Barnes, who threw on grievances, kept his more placid comrades up to the mark by intermittent explosions in his Hyde Park vein of an earlier day.

"Jes' look at *that* now!" he would cry, flourishing a news-sheet, bespattered with grinning faces: "Straike me pink! What they want to go makin' bloody fools of us that way? 'Cause we've spoke our minds to Fritzie, an' brought 'ome 'is playful little souvy-neers in ower insides, *are* we arskin' to be slobbered over by wimmen an' mettymorphussed into nickel-

plyted 'eroes? Wot we *do* arst — an' don't git — is to be treated just an' fair, like any ornery bloke, wot 'asn't bin fool enough to get crocked up fer King an' country. While one lot's insultin' us with this 'ero touch, t'other lot's engyged in pinchin' our pay books an' tyin' us up with regyerlations, fear we'd play the skunk ef we got a mite o' freedom. Wonder they don't clap us in leg-irons, so's we cawn't git runnin' too far from 'Ome Sweet 'Ome. Wot say, coves? Straikin' seems to be the fashion over this side. Vote we do a bit too! Jes' show 'em 'ow — " Shouts of ironic applause.

"An' what about them rations we git in the papers?" quavered the shell-shock boy.

"Winder-dressin', lovey!" jeered the ironic Barnes. "Fillin' to the eye, though not to the stummic. We blokes in the trenches got ter be gryeful ef we see enough to swear by. 'Tis the good little boys at the Byse as collars all the plums."

"They do thaht," Baird confirmed him in broad Scots. "Ah've been there, an' likely ma crocked chest 'ull tak me there ag'in, if they dinna pass me oot onfit. Ah wasna mighty fit when ah joined, an' ah've bin through all the hells since Monsse. But ah'll niver git ma wee bit penshin, if they chielts can prove it amang them that ma chest's a bit o' civeelian oreeginal sin, or worrit me to put in fur release on substiootion. But ma wurrd, ah'm canny. Ah'll stick it, till ah croomble oop — "

"An' *then* they'll give yer a dog's burial, an' charge yer corp for the buryin' blanket," chirped Barnes.

There were cries of 'Shame!' But Baird solemnly shook his head.

"Not in oor regimint, mon. Oor orficers agreed amang them to charrge they blankets fur lost. Sir-r Mark tell't me so himself'. An' isn't he after hammerin' the noo at they thick-heads that be turrnin' the British Ar-rmy into a gang o' Socialists? All ah'm sayin' is — wait till the Boys come home!"

Some vocalist started warbling "Boys in khaki, boys in blue," and Derek — who sat at Keith's desk trying to write to his father — gave it up in despair. Pocketing his letter, he swung round on the swivel seat and joined in a general sing-song till bedtime.

The mail letter was achieved next morning, in the quiet of Mark's study, where he was privileged to sit, on occasion: a privilege so welcome to both that Mark decided to promote him to orderly room clerk, as soon as he had been long enough 'in residence' to justify the innovation. Meanwhile, Derek was grateful exceedingly for the passing respite from his very good friends below stairs: — never more so than on mail day.

He had much to say to his father; and more that, unhappily, could not be said without implicating Van. By this time, he was convinced that Schonberg was behind the Avonleigh scheme; for it appeared to be run on lavish lines. His Uncle, Sir Vyvian Blount — who often visited him in hospital — had, on the last occasion, asked him some straight questions about the whole affair; and Derek, in framing his answers, had been badly torn between concern for Avonleigh and his persistent loyalty to Van. Sir Vyvian's vigorous handshake at parting had left him half fearful, half hopeful, that the shrewd old General might have read between the lines. Worse still, a chance conversation in the ward, one evening, had suggested a possible clue to Schonberg's mysterious zeal.

Two convalescents, who had been out with friends, were protesting, in the usual vein, against the incurable official leniency to enemy aliens, after eighteen months of war. One of them produced damning evidence that German women, with a fluent command of English, were still worming their way into hospitals, as attendants or Swedish masseuses, in order to pick up talk about the War. As a rule, it seemed, they favoured Homes and Hospitals for officers, who were more apt to provide their unsuspected listeners with useful material —

At that point a fit of caution took the speaker; but Derek had heard more than enough.

The bare possibility of Avonleigh being so utilized had filled him with helpless rage. Schonberg, he knew, found time to run down there pretty frequently; and Van — he guessed — would be unlikely to trouble his head over such trivial details as the testimonials or precise nationality of his hospital staff.

It was hateful; too bad to be true. It savoured of cheap tales he had read in the trenches, when no decent stuff was available. He could not bear to believe it of Van.

More than once he had been on the verge of challenging him with a direct question, and had only been restrained by fore-knowledge of futility. They would simply quarrel again. And the indirect method, of probing others with hints or questions that might implicate his brother, was so inherently distasteful to him that he scarcely gave it a thought. Van had all the facts. Let him tell his own tale unhampered by comments that might be inaccurate, therefore unjust.

That hidden sense of worry was the only disturbing element during those wonderful spring days, when the breath of renewal blew clean and strong through all the avenues of his being.

His brief but vital period in France — the comradeship, the horrors, the intimacy with overmastering pain, and that half-conscious hovering on the edge of things — seemed to have sharply cut his life in two: and burned away the aftermath of his early, tragic blunder. Having made an unholy muddle of things in the first instance, it looked as if he were to be allowed a fresh chance, in kinder circumstances. The idea was a pleasant fancy, if no more. It revived the hopeless hope that somewhere there awaited him an experience which would transmute the iron of life to gold, and reconcile him to its more static aspects, once for all; but it did not by any means include the idea of marriage. The impersonal streak in him — violated by the demands of a clinging, fragile wife — reasserted itself, these days, with the added force of reaction. Happily there still remained his catholic capacity for friendship; and in the four women at Wynchcombe Friars he had promising material to hand.

With Sheila he had soon established a real and satisfying brotherly intimacy. Sister Barton and Miss Lenox were men's women in the best sense; and Miss de Vigne was certainly not the least attractive of the four. As Jack's sister and Van's possible wife, he felt keen to know more of her. But her work

involved less personal contact with the men; and, except when Derek spent an evening with the family, opportunities for friendly talk were few and brief.

Sometimes they would stroll on the terrace, when the more stalwart of her charges were scattered about helping Mark's two ancient gardeners. And it was on one of these occasions that she first alluded to Jack.

"Do you know," she said, "I have actually talked to three of the men who were with him — at the time. And it was good to hear how they spoke of him. One of them — about his own age — said fervently, 'Better the whole dozen of us than him'; and though one couldn't very well agree — one loved him for it."

Derek nodded, looking away into the distance.

"Good fellow — I'd like to meet him."

"He's gone, too," she said softly. "He died of wounds in January. And he sent me a message. 'Cheero, Miss de Vigne. I'm in luck. I shall see the Captain and tell him you got his V.C.'"

"'In the faith of little children' . . ." quoted Derek, from one of the few poems he knew by heart. He could not trust himself to strike a more personal note. "It has amazed me and — shamed me over and over again."

"Yes, it's magnificent! Such rough fellows — but scratch the surface and you come upon the child. It is that makes us love them so. It seems to me — the true Christianity has sprung into life again out there, in spite of the horrors — perhaps because of them. Not Church Christianity; but simply — 'the faith of little children'; the spirit of service and sacrifice and brotherly kindness —"

Derek nodded again. "It's there right enough — under the mud and blood and profanity. Half the fellows aren't aware of it. And they're none the worse for that! They just do things that it wouldn't strike them to do over here — to the accompaniment of language that would make the average curate's hair curl! Yet I reckon some of them could give him points both as to faith and works."

She smiled. "The great question is — will the Church rise to their simple faith or try and put the lid on them, when they get back?"

"She'll have to *reckon* with them anyway," Derek said gravely. "They've done more than pray and preach. They've resisted unto blood. What matter if they *are* a bit foggy about doctrines and bored with sermons?" A pause. "Jacko was one of that kind, wasn't he?"

"Yes, indeed —"

Her low voice had a tremor in it; and this time Derek ventured his question.

"Have you really got his V.C.? I never knew."

She unfastened a hook and pulled at a fine chain that Derek had noticed above her apron.

At the end of it was the little bronze cross "For Valour," and she dropped it into Derek's open palm. He let it rest there a moment without speaking.

"It would have pleased him so," he said at last.

"Perhaps it pleases him a little now. Perhaps he didn't need young Hawkins to tell him that I wear it always." And lifting it by the chain she slipped it back into its place. "Dad sent it straight to me. He said next to Mother, I had the best right. Jacko was the image of her; and we both adored her. That's what made the special link between us. Did you see him after you came home?"

"Just a glimpse in Town. His last leave."

Then encouraged by her friendliness and her rare-mood of unreserve, he added: "My best memory of him will always be those three days on the Island. I've never been able to thank you for them — but I've always remembered I owed them to you —"

Her serious face lit up. "I *am* glad they meant so much to you. He simply loved them. I'm afraid my zeal on that occasion was not altogether for your poor little wife."

"Well, anyway, you were so thundering good to her that she never forgot you — to the last."

"Dear little soul! I didn't know I'd made such an im-

pression. But afterwards — when I heard . . . I felt so sorry I hadn't written."

And Derek could not tell her that had she done so, he might not have been standing there now.

It was after this talk with her that he first caught himself wondering how a girl of that quality would amalgamate with Van. But that, after all, was Van's affair.

Because she was a slow study, she attracted him the more. To hear her extol the war spirit of *la belle France*, when the mood fired her, was to catch a vital spark from that most vital, most incalculable of nations; and on the day when she discovered the depth of his admiration for her father's country a very real link was established between them. Pure Saxon in her poise and dignity, Latin, in her delicate reserves and the light alertness of spirit that gleamed through, the race elements were so finely balanced in her that one could not always tell, at a given moment, which would prevail; and the piquancy of uncertainty enhanced her charm. Even in seriousness, her eyes had a soft radiance, as if some inner light shone through. He said to himself "She is a 'lantern-bearer'": and he was right. Each friendly talk they achieved, however brief, illuminated some fresh facet of her unobtrusively individual personality.

Her interest, at this time, was chiefly focussed on the coming concert: and it was one evening in the drawing-room — after a committee on the programme — that he struck a spark from her which took him completely by surprise.

It arose out of a letter from Van, asking if he might bring Karl along on the 30th. They would both be going down that day and Karl seemed rather keen. Would Derek be a good chap and square it with Forsyth? He might add, by way of inducement, that Karl could 'tootle a bit on the fiddle.' It was a secret vice; but if polite pressure were applied he might be persuaded to oblige.

After dinner, when the ladies had left them, Derek put forward Van's request: and it lit a wicked gleam in Mark's eye.

' "He's a pretty cool customer! — Springing an extra man on

us at the eleventh hour; and one of his beastly Schonbergs into the bargain."

"Karl isn't beastly," Derek retorted with a touch of heat. "He's a thorough good chap. And his sentiments are as sound as my own."

"Pity he was so regrettably careless in his choice of a father! Anyway, one's bound to say 'Yes.'"

"*Not* if you mean 'No.'"

There was a perceptible stiffening in Derek's tone; and Mark gave his shoulder a friendly shake. "All serene, old man. I never *can* resist getting a rise out of you over your precious Van! We'll swallow his Schonberg this time; and you can tell him two items on the fiddle is the price of his bed! Now for the Committee."

It was drawn up, informally, in the square bay window that looked out upon the terrace and the pines, and caught the last of the sun. Only Sister Barton and Honor wore uniform. The other two had taken an evening off. Miss de Vigne occupied her favourite corner on the cushioned window-seat, whence one had a glimpse of blue distances beyond. She wore a smoke-coloured gown, very straight and simple, with filmy sleeves; her only ornament a medallion set with diamonds. Its obverse, Derek now knew, was a lifelike miniature of Jack. The other three were knitting. She had an open book on her lap. He had discovered, at Silversands, that she was a genuine reader.

While Mark lowered himself into his big chair, Derek sat down in the window opposite her.

"What's the special subject?" he asked, in response to her welcoming smile.

She held up the book to him and he read: "*Psychologie des Foules. Gustave Le Bon.*"

"Rather stiff stuff, isn't it?"

"Yes. But fascinating. Don't give me away," she added in a lower tone — "I was devouring it till one o'clock this morning."

"And up at seven! That won't do."

"It's my only chance," she pleaded. "And as I don't suffer *les foulies* gladly, it's up to me to try and temper my 'prejudice' with knowledge!"

Derek affected exaggerated surprise. "You — indulging in slang!"

"Is it not permitted — ever? I rather love that one. And I quite miss some of your Canadian gems."

Just then Mark announced that Van had asked leave to bring Karl Schonberg, his assistant Agent. "Derek goes bail he won't pinch the silver and is *plus royaliste que le roi*. No objections, I hope?"

"My dear — of course not," from Sheila. But Derek, who was watching Miss de Vigne, saw the breeze of some strong emotion pass over her face. The minute gold flecks in her eyes became sparks of fire. Her brows went up; her lips parted. The next moment they were deliberately compressed; and turning her head away, she sat quietly watching the enchantment of the pinewood penetrated by the last rays of the sun.

No one seemed to have noticed anything; but Derek suddenly remembered that he had seen those sparks in her eyes at Silver-sands; and he was thinking: "If she dislikes Karl as much as that, it's an awkward lookout for Van."

He decided to take courage and broach the subject, if chance favoured him.

The programme settled, Sister Barton and Honor went off to the wards. Sheila retired with Mark to the grand piano at the end of the room; and Derek remained sitting in the window with Gabrielle de Vigne.

In response to her half-smile, he said impulsively: "Miss de Vigne, I couldn't help noticing — I hope you're not very much annoyed —"

"But I *am* — horribly annoyed. I am very angry — with your brother," she flashed out, to his complete astonishment. Two spots of colour glowed in her cheeks and the sparks were alight again in her eyes. "It is a failure in tact — unlike him — bringing his German friends here. To me the very word Schonberg is a red rag. I told you — long ago —"

"Yes. I remember very well. It led to Jacko speaking out for the first time."

"It led — *he* led to the break between Jacko and Dad. You can't know — as I do — how it hurt them both. And he cared no more than if he had squashed a mosquito that was worrying him. You think me a vengeful Latin? But no! I can't forgive that detestable man, nor think decently of his family. *Mon Dieu, non!*"

The last was a fierce whisper; and the whole was spoken with such passionate vehemence that Derek was taken aback; though he liked her none the less for that spontaneous self-revealing.

"But poor old Karl is only half Schonberg," he urged, with Van at the back of his mind.

"Half too much for my taste. I used to see, too often, a look of that man in his curious eyes. And that thickness of the nose — " Her shiver of distaste was genuine. "I believe he is better than the others. But if you'd had to put up with them and their friends for more than twenty years — perhaps you would understand — "

She was herself again now, collected and cool.

"I do understand," said Derek, returning her smile. "I rather misjudged him myself. And I feel the connection comes hard on him. He's very much his mother's son, and he's had a thorough-going English education."

"Yet he still has the hateful German mentality that plans and calculates and never shows its hand. That is *their* way of reserve. The Englishman hides his feelings — the German hides his intentions — "

"Yes. Ours is a matter of character, the training in self-control that we get at our despised Public Schools and Universities. Theirs is chiefly mental — "

"But *altogether* mental!" The inner fire was flaring up again. "They wallow in their emotions. They conceal their thoughts. They are always working deliberately for some hidden purpose. Ruthlessly they discard the superfluous; and they hardly ever give themselves away — as Englishmen so often do,

out of sheer honesty. It is a part of their devilish efficiency and half the secret of their success. True?"

Derek sighed — was she thinking of John Burlton and of Van —?

"Bitterly true. In the way of guile, we are like children in their hands. The trouble is — shall we ever be otherwise?"

She was silent a moment, gazing into the glory of the sunset with dreamy, troubled eyes. Then she said, very low: "Ah — how one is shaken by that fear when one's mind staggers under each fresh, hideous revealing. Over here they don't altogether realize — how should they? But when one has been so long in France — tortured, heroic France —"

Her hand closed sharply on the window ledge; and the silence that fell between them was charged with understanding.

Presently she looked round and said in her lighter manner: "Now perhaps you see why I was angry? I have no use for them — halves or wholes — however innocuous they may appear."

But Derek's keen sense of justice could not leave it at that. "Miss de Vigne, I give you my word Karl is thoroughly anti-German. He's in a hard position, poor chap. Is it kind to make things harder for him? We had a straight talk about it all soon after I came home."

By way of proof he gave her the gist of it, punctuated with vigorous comment; but he could feel, all the while, that he was making small impression upon her steel-clad antagonism.

"Do you suggest that Karl was lying?" he demanded at last with a challenging look.

Her shrug had the true French quality. "I suggest nothing so impolite! But I distrust them utterly. There is always some under-motive —"

"Well, I am glad I'm not in his shoes!" Derek broke in, only half in joke. "Goodness knows I'm a hard-believing sceptic. But I flatter myself I know an honest man when I meet him. It's cruel of you to shake the little faith I possess!"

At that she shifted her eyes from the sunset glory, and the smile she gave him atoned for her obstinacy. "But don't let

me shake your faith. I sincerely hope it is justified — for every one's sake."

"So do I. And you might give Karl a chance to prove it on Friday." He hesitated; then, looking full at her, he said: "You know — he is a great friend of Van's."

She returned his look steadily. He fancied she changed colour ever so little.

"*And the father — unfortunately,*" she said in a low voice. "Mr. Blount is so clever, so charming, it seems strange — he has so little — perception. Of course I would never talk to him like this —"

Mark and Sheila had left the piano and were coming towards them.

"How about that last thing, Gay?" he asked. "Not quite catchy enough?"

This time her faint flush was unmistakable: "Oh, I'm so sorry, dear. I'm afraid I wasn't properly attending. We were — rather engrossed —"

Mark glanced from one to the other with an approving smile. "Great is the truth . . .!" he said good-humouredly. "We can inflict it on you again."

Derek returned to his 'bunk' that night more than ever interested in the girl whose acquaintance he should by rights have made years ago — in Jacko's day — if he had not been such a backward beggar in that respect. An increasing interest deepened his concern for Van's prospects of success. Mark was right, she was a real woman. She ought to have the real big thing. And surely she could be trusted to evoke it; in which case he would back her to cure Van of Schonbergitis and draw out the best in him — if any woman could. He supposed Van intended to try his luck on Friday: — and his luck had been proverbial from the day he was born.

CHAPTER IV

Le cœur a ses raisons, que la raison ne connaît pas.

PASCAL

DEREK would have been immensely surprised had he guessed that Gabrielle de Vigne foresaw the climax quite as clearly as himself. Still more surprised had he known that the whole matter had long since been settled in her own mind. Eminently French in her attitude to marriage, she saw it, primarily, as a sane and sacred partnership with one supreme end in view — the family, the race. An event so vital and far-reaching must not merely happen. It must to some extent be prudently planned: and Gabrielle, having no mother to think or plan for her, must needs do both discreetly for herself.

Since the chance renewal of her acquaintance with Evan Blount, he had thrust himself upon her attention with a tactful, unobtrusive persistence that no true woman could pretend to misunderstand. But it was not till he came to Wynchcombe Friars that her interest had been definitely quickened by his evident affection for the brother, with whom he seemed to have hardly a thought in common. Also, he was distinctly pleasing to look at; and he had brains and a flicker of humour that saved his complacence from slipping into mere conceit. He was just serenely sure of himself — that was all. It might be a fine-drawn distinction; but Gabrielle's French brain delighted in fine-drawn distinctions and all the delicate nuances of life. So — she had permitted herself to be interested: and — when the true cause of his visitations became unmistakable — she had gone 'into committee' with her own heart, quite simply and naturally, on the all-important subject.

From her un-English point of view, it was no mere matter of securing an eligible husband. It was a question of her own

fitness and willingness to accept one who was heir to great estates; and the adequacy of her own little fortune as a contribution to their partnership. Both her French blood and a touch of her obstinate pride came in there. As to the man himself — though he had not yet stirred the deeps, she already felt for him a very real tenderness, faintly tinged, at times, with amusement. His attitude to his country — at once detached and insular — jarred with her own imperial outlook; and the Schonberg obsession must cease, if he wanted to make her his wife. Her girlhood had been haunted by that intrusive element. It could not be allowed to overshadow her marriage. She would make things clear to him: — save him from himself and them. She believed the match would please her step-father; and Jacko's 'Dirks' for a brother-in-law would be something of a possession.

If, in Van, she saw the potential lover, in Derek, she saw the potential friend. Long ago, at Silversands, she had recognized him as a real personality; had detected the hidden intensity, the queer, still strength that fitted him for suffering. And now, when she watched him limping along beside her other charges, in the ill-fitting blue coat, it hurt her to remember the sun-tanned, clean-cut man he was at Victoria, with the breath of Canada's great woods about him and the tang of her racy speech on his lips. He had lost Jack. He had lost his poor little wife. It began to look as if he might lose the best part of his health. From all accounts he had no mother worth mentioning; and the latent mother in her — divining his need — yearned over him the more.

It was her instinctive attitude towards the whole race of man. In her eyes they were beings of a larger sphere; very splendid, yet, in some ways, divinely stupid; and more pathetically dependent on the loyal co-operation of their women-folk than they seemed able to realize or willing to admit. And War, that had made heroes of them, had made them also more than ever dependent, more than ever appealing. She had learnt from the great-hearted women of France to call the maimed '*les glorieux*'; and, for herself, every *poilu*, every Tommy she

had tended, in hospitals and dressing-stations, became, for the moment, her adopted child. Here, at Wynchcombe Friars, she had taken to her heart the whole of Mark's varied and variable family; and especially she was glad when Derek had been added to the tale of her adopted sons.

Yet she was not altogether satisfied about him; nor could she quite make him out. She supposed his heart was buried with poor, pretty Lois in British Columbia; and she would say he had a strictly limited capacity for falling in love. A pity — a thousand pities — that he had squandered his manhood on a passionate, impulsive marriage in which there could have been no true partnership; a marriage that, in her view, was a wrong to his family and to the race. She could but conclude, reluctantly, that the general conditions and deprivations out there had made him unable to resist the lure of a pretty face. Evidently Jacko had never been enlightened. The whole deplorable episode was a tragic riddle to which she could find no answer.

But just at present — with the fateful week-end drawing nearer — Van entered in and took complete command of her thoughts. Now that decision loomed irrevocable, she found her woman's perversity prompting her to ward it off a little longer — only a little longer —

The unreasonable English streak in her seemed to be unexpectedly asserting itself at the eleventh hour; demanding a stronger emotion, a deeper thrill, to halo this greatest event of her life. That was the worst of being 'twins' instead of all of a piece. Just when one believed that Tweedledum was securely in command of affairs, one was liable to a disconcerting attack in flank from Tweedledee —!

It was on the very morning of the concert, at the prosaic hour of 7.30 A.M., that these unauthorized sensations most sharply beset her. She was standing before her mirror, in her blue gown adjusting her winged cap with perfect precision. That done she set her hands on the dressing-table and gazed steadily into her own eyes. If one looked long enough, one could experience the most eerie sensations; but to-day she had

neither time nor inclination for such fascinating spiritual excursions. Her mind was resolutely set on the matter in hand — to quench that other Gabrielle, who, by this time ought to know better; to reassert the supremacy of the true Gabrielle Honoré de Vigne: — a reincarnation, according to Tante Élise, of the famous Gabrielle Honoré, her own great-grandmother, who had shone in the salons and carried her aristocratic head proudly through the Terror. Since there was no elder to be stern with her, she must be stern with herself.

“*Ma foi! Qu’as-tu donc, Gabrielle?*” she addressed her own image in her crispest voice. “You — turned twenty-six, clamouring for sentimental thrills like any green girl! If Mr. Blount honours you with an offer of marriage — you will accept him. *Voilà tout!*”

Apparently the other Gabrielle had nothing to say for herself: not a leg to stand on —

Then she remembered her men who must not be kept waiting for their breakfast, though the heavens fall.

She spent a strenuous morning with them in the weavers' entertainment hall. Mark and Sheila were in command of affairs; and Derek, defying his limp, instituted himself her right-hand man. Formal rows of seats were relegated to the back of the hall. The rest was given over to a more scattered grouping of chairs and tables and massed plants: a friendly setting for the smoking concert that the men considered the cream of the evening. Those of them who had a personal share in the programme frankly regarded their own contribution as the pivot of interest; and advertised the fact with the unblushing egotism of children.

Gabrielle, in addition to her own items, had consented to accompany most of them. Though not a highly skilled musician she had a genuine gift for accompaniment; and the men had soon discovered that when she played for them they lost their nervousness and sang their best. In consequence she had been ‘snowed under’ with urgent requests and had acceded to them all. Finally, at the eleventh hour, Mark was added to the list.

She had noticed at lunch that Sheila looked white and tired, with violet shadows under her eyes. A perfectly natural suggestion that she should go and lie down had called up a faint flush, and a murmured: "I'm all right, dear. Don't worry."

But a little later — while Gabrielle was arranging the drawing-room vases — Mark swung himself hurriedly into the room.

"I say, old girl — can you manage my songs to-night, as well as the rest, without your hands dropping off?"

He looked so unlike himself that she wanted to pat him soothingly and say: "There — there!" But she only smiled and answered: "Of course, I'll be delighted. Only —"

"I'm coming to that. Sheila's a bit — crocked up," he said in the same tense manner. "As a matter of fact — she fainted just now. I've settled her on the sofa in our room. She must go to bed after dinner and you must play hostess for her at the show. Hard lines — when she's so keen. But—well — " His lips moved nervously, "you might slip up and see her. She'll explain."

To Gabrielle explanations were superfluous. Mark's odd shyness and the look in his eyes sufficed.

"Oh — my dear!" she said on an indrawn breath. But he so plainly shrank from an intimate word or look that she added briskly, "I'll go at once"; and sped upstairs with a song of thanksgiving in her heart.

Sheila lay on a low couch in the window, lovingly entrenched with rugs and pillows. The spring sunshine, streaming through a pane behind her, seemed to set a halo round her dark head. She was the nearest thing to a sister that Gabrielle had known; and her marriage — from Gay's point of view — had been a grave, if splendid, error. Now she was justified of her courage — her unswerving devotion.

At sight of Gabrielle two spots of colour showed in her cheeks. "Nothing to fuss about, darling. I'm all right! It's only — Mark's been asserting himself for once in a way!"

"So I gathered — and with the best of reasons —"

"Gay! — Has he told you?"

"But no — not a syllable! He imagines he has left it to

you." Then she knelt down by the sofa and gathered Sheila into her arms. "Oh — *ma mie!*" she whispered, holding her close, and again, "*Ma mie!* You were right — after all —"

"Of course I was," Sheila answered, with her divine obstinacy, clinging to Gay and thinking of Mark — only of Mark, the passionate tenderness of his parting kiss and the veiled triumph in his eyes —

And Mark himself, having cautiously negotiated the broad shallow stairs, had gone straight to the studio, to be alone with the Great Certainty that still dazzled his brain.

These last weeks he had scarcely dared to let himself hope — And now —!

Wynchcombe Friars — the place and people he loved — were, at least, potentially secure to his father's line. A son — IT must be a son — would fill his own place when the word came for him to pass on. The distracting under-sense, that half his work would be undone by Uncle Everard, need haunt him no more —

And high above his own virile triumph at having made good against heavy odds soared the supreme fact that Sheila — never more beloved and worshipped than at this moment — had not lost all in renouncing all —

The thought of her made him restless to be with her again. He glanced at the clock. Too soon. He must wait a bit. Give her a chance with Gay. The vision of Gabrielle speeding upstairs came back to him and he thought: "There went a born mother. She must have known. Hope to God she doesn't seriously contemplate squandering herself on the immaculate Trevanyon Blount!"

CHAPTER V

I seek no further, it is she!

*Such worth as this is,
Shall fix my flying wishes
And determine them to kisses.*

RICHARD CRASHAW

VAN arrived at Wynchcombe Friars that evening, in the best of spirits. He had thoroughly enjoyed his run through Surrey and Hampshire; the air crisp and clear after a morning of storm; and Karl in a friendly humorous mood.

"By the way," Van had remarked suddenly, as the gates came into view, "I suppose you must have known Miss de Vigne pretty well in the old days?"

Karl nodded. "At one time I saw a good deal of her — and Jack. But I haven't seen her for about four years."

"She's come on a lot since then."

"One saw that she would."

"You're a 'cute observer, Karl, as well as a sentimentalist!" quoth Van with a sidelong glance at his friend. He himself had seen nothing of the sort.

Karl accepted the compliment with a half-smile — and said no more. He had fallen silent as the drive drew to an end: and Van had no lack of interesting food for reflection.

It would be too much to say that he definitely intended to try his luck; but he had a distinct under-sense that the merest tilt might precipitate the crisis: and, on arrival, he entered the drawing-room with a disturbing thrill of expectancy in the region of his heart.

The room was full of strangers; chiefly Mrs. Macnair's talented friends. No sign of Miss de Vigne; only Mark and Sheila, 'doing the dutiful,' to these confounded musical and

dramatic lights, who were neither young nor smart, nor conspicuously personable. The sole exception was a girl in a flame-coloured gown and a necklace of scarabs; thin, eager, intense, with eyes like saucers; the kind of girl Van would go miles out of his way to avoid. Mark introduced her as a rising violinist; but Van soon passed on, leaving Karl to make what he could of her intensities.

Perplexity simmered in him; and his thrill subsided into a very unromantic fit of annoyance. As they filed into the dining-room, he had a passing impulse to ask outright what had become of her. But he thought: "Better wait a bit. Might look too pointed." And before the soup plates were removed, Sheila volunteered the information that the others had gone down to the Hall and were having a scratch supper on the spot.

"Gay is tremendously keen," she added. "And Derek has been helping her valiantly. We're all so devoted to him. It's lovely having him here."

And Van thought: "Hang it all, I know well enough what a first-rate chap Dirks is."

He also knew there were ungenerous moments when he resented Miss de Vigne's trick of quoting his brother's opinion; her implied reliance on his judgment, especially in matters connected with the War. Certainly it began to look as if there was bigger stuff in old Dirks than any of them had ever given him credit for. No harm if he made friends with her — so long as it went no farther. Never do for the poor chap to get let in —

Probably they were having no end of mild fun at their 'scratch supper'; and here was he — bored stiff with Mrs. Macnair's immaculate collection of art treasures! He always felt out of it with a musical crowd. And there was Karl exceeding the speed limit with the flame-coloured atrocity. A dam-sight livelier, than he had been in the car. Queer, unaccountable beggar, Karl.

As for Miss de Vigne — what the devil was he to infer from her unexpected move? She could not pretend to be unaware

that he had let himself in for a rather boring entertainment entirely on her account. It was jolly unfair on a man and not her style. But underneath his surface annoyance, he felt keener than ever for a sight of her —

It was nearly eight when Mark and his party entered the concert hall, that was rapidly filling up. Van — looking out for the familiar figure in wedgwood blue and winged cap — experienced the surprise of his life at sight of an altogether new Gabrielle de Vigne, transformed from a mere war-worker into a lovely and distinguished-looking woman of his own world. Her simple semi-evening dress was a sheer delight to his fastidious eye. Some sort of filmy grey stuff it was, that showed silver lights when she moved: two rows of soft grey fur round the hem; a wide black sash shot with silver; and wood violets at her breast. A bar of diamonds held them in place; and her only other ornament was a single row of pearls perfectly graduated and matched. All this he saw and relished, while she greeted the 'art treasures' with her inimitable ease.

When his turn came, he held her hand closely and said in a low tone: "You took my breath away. Why weren't you up there?"

"Bad of me?" she queried lightly; "I'm afraid I shirked the celebrities — and they wanted me down here. I hoped you'd understand — and forgive!"

"Easier to do the first than the last." For a moment his eyes lingered in hers, then dropped to the flowers at her breast. "Dirks?" he asked boldly.

"No. Robin — my shell-shock boy. He picked every one." And Van felt perceptibly relieved. "Why didn't you let on? I'd have brought you lilies."

"Too kind! But the unforgiven would be undeserving. And I love the wild things best."

"Unrepentant — anyway!" murmured Van, with one of his looks; and became aware of Karl at his elbow. "*Is an introduction necessary?*" he asked. "Karl, here, says he used to know you 'when all the world was young' — what?"

"Yes — years ago," she said with a perceptible stiffening of manner. "We've most of us travelled a long way since then."

Karl — who was gazing at her with all his eyes — stood mumchance and barely touched her hand.

"Hul-lo!" mused Van, frankly dismayed. "If she's anti-Schonberg, it may mean rocks ahead."

And, as Gabrielle turned to greet a newcomer, he drew his friend on to where Derek and Cummins stood, a little apart — very conspicuous in their ill-fitting hospital blue.

"Rough luck on Dirks," reflected Van. He was always sympathetic when his own barometer stood high. "Does his best to get snuffed out in his country's service, and by way of thanks, they convert him into a guy."

His greeting of Karl left nothing to be desired: and Van — having launched them — secured a seat near Miss de Vigne, just as the stout contralto came forward to make her bow.

She was followed by the flame-coloured atrocity, who asserted her artistry by inflicting on that unoffending crowd an orgy of discord as lurid as her own gown; a bewildering welter of sound that evoked no answering stir of the spirit or heart; no 'lingering waves of sweetness and regret.'

"I call that a gratuitous assault upon the nervous system — what?" Van murmured to Miss de Vigne, leaning confidentially down to her, because her chair was a little lower than his own. "Hard on the men. They get their fill of unholy noises over there. I thought Mrs. Macnair was by way of being sympathetic —"

"Not 'by way of,'" Gabrielle corrected him. She was enchanting when she smiled, like that, with her eyes. "Miss Polwheel was thrust upon her at the last moment. The others have come to give pleasure, not to show off!"

And so it proved.

For Van, their lively alternations of speech and song were mere unregarded accompaniments to his low-toned talk with the girl beside him. For the first time he felt intimately in touch with Gabrielle, the woman. And he was beginning to realize how the sedate hospital uniform had coloured his whole

idea of her; how discreetly it minimized her physical graces and threw into high relief the qualities essential for her work.

Now behold a transformation! And his almost feminine eye for detail missed no item of this fuller revealing of her charms. Faultless, the line of her neck from ear to shoulder, the curve of her breasts, the gleam of shapely arms through her long transparent sleeves.

And her hair! Free of that puritanical cap, it swept back from her forehead, duskily soft, like a cloud. It had smoke-blue shadows and coppery gleams where it caught the light. From her parting — a little to one side — the clear sweep of it was broken by one long graceful wave that ran slantwise over the crown of her head. "Nature — or the latest thing in patents?" he wondered, Van-like; and, after due inspection, voted for Nature.

Seated a little above her, he could let his eyes take their fill of her, while she remained intent on her precious entertainment — divinely unaware. More than once his attention reverted to her remarkable pearls that gleamed like drops of moonlight on the brunette tint of her skin. Who was the lucky devil privileged to give her pearls like that? A sudden possessive thrill of jealousy stirred in his veins.

During the pauses, they achieved snatches of intimate talk; and he ventured on more than one direct compliment, exulting in his power to call the blood into her cheeks.

To-night he was pre-eminently his social self; ready with the flatteries and small change of his own world. He forgot to play up to her points of view; forgot, almost, that she had points of view. And at the back of his brain lurked a vague, disturbing sense that he was being swept towards the Inevitable faster than he intended; losing his hold on the reins —

He looked forward keenly, if a little apprehensively, to the informal half of the evening.

It began when the last of the Londoners had contributed his mite; when they had all been refreshed at the buffet and sped on their way with thanks and cheers. 'Locals,' who had no

taste for amateur music, flavoured with woodbines, departed also; and the men — having enjoyed themselves well enough in other people's way — now prepared to do so in their own.

Van, reverting hopefully to 'the Forsyth box,' found Gay preparing to ascend the platform.

He looked whimsically aggrieved. "What are you running off for? I thought you were only on once —"

"Yes — officially. But I'm booked for nearly all the accompaniments as well!"

"Confound their cheek! The notion was — you were to accompany me. What else did I scoot down all this way for?"

"And what else have I been doing for the last hour?"

"Come along, Gay," Mark called to her from the stage. Unable to manage the steps, he had entered from the wings, and was greeted with a storm of cheers. When these subsided, Van offered Gabrielle his arm.

She drew back, flushing a little, as if she guessed that he attached some deeper significance to the simple act of politeness.

"But I'm an independent person. Besides — the formality's obsolete —"

"It's no formality. It's a privilege." His voice dropped a tone. "As a pure act of graciousness . . .?"

"Oh — if you put it that way —!"

With a suspicion of a shrug she laid her finger-tips on his arm.

Fresh applause as he led her to the piano, and returned holding himself a shade more erect than usual.

Deserted by his bright particular star, he made straight for Derek and Karl, who seemed to have a good deal to say to each other. "Since when?" he wondered, mildly intrigued. But all he said was — "Your funeral next. Are you quaking in your shoes?"

Karl set his lips. He was looking up at the platform.

"It is a bit of an ordeal."

"Never before—and never no more?" queried Van. He felt incapable of seriousness — even a trifle light-headed. "Would you believe it, Dirks — I haven't been favoured with

a scrape of his precious fiddle since Oxford days. Yet he'll stand up to oblige a crowd of Tommies."

Karl frowned and looked uncomfortable. "Oh, well — it's up to us all to do what we can for them. In my case — little enough."

"You don't outgrow your modesty, old man!"

"Oh, shut it — they've begun. What a rare fine voice he has."

"Scots wha hae wi' Wallace bled!
Scots whom Bruce hath often led!"

The greatest of all battle-songs rang clear and commanding through the hall; and Mark — leaning an elbow on the piano — looked more vital and vigorous than those who had hoped against hope, through the black weeks of his ordeal, had ever thought to see him look again.

Before the last verse, he shouted: "Back me up, boys, if you know the words."

And the response — the deep, dragging roar of men who are putting their backs into it — swept the polite section of the audience metaphorically off its feet. For the space of three minutes even Van was lifted an inch or so off the ground. He could see Miss de Vigne's lips moving and her eyes shining away there at the piano. He wanted to extinguish them all that he might catch the sound of her voice. And his detached self thought, "Steady on! I'm going the pace like any enamoured youngster. — Hullo! Encore, is it? Forsyth's quite a nut at the game."

This time it was Wallace's virile slumber song: "Son of Mine" — man and boy, couched in the heather, under the stars. It was an old favourite of his mother's; and Mark had chosen it on impulse. She would understand. So would Gay. But what matter?

They did understand very well.

Gabrielle rose from the piano with tears in her eyes. "You've got back your voice — and something more," she said; and her heart added: "If only Sheila could have heard him! If she could see him now!"

After Mark — Karl. He rose, looking so nervous and reluctant that Van said kindly: "Buck up, old thing! No professional critics here. Give us a fandango."

Karl smiled feebly and shook his head. Near the foot of the steps he met Gabrielle.

"Can I be any use?" she asked politely.

"Thanks very much. I needn't trouble you," he said with a touch of stiffness.

"May I know what it's going to be?"

"Nothing elaborate. Just a serenade."

"Gounod?"

"No. It's by an unknown man." He looked away from her, adding in a less formal tone: "It's called 'Serenade at a Villa' — an interpretation of Browning's poem. Do you know it?"

At that her politeness thawed a little. "But yes. I know my Browning inside out and upside down! Thank you for telling me. Now I can follow the idea."

Van rose at her approach. She was constrained to take Karl's vacant chair between the brothers; and Van opined that it might be diplomatic to put in a word for his friend.

"I'm glad you spoke to old Karl," he said. "He's a giddy débutant. Deadly nervous."

"I saw that. Does he play well?"

"He used to tootle at Oxford. He's dead nuts on music. A kind of religion with him —"

"Hush!" she commanded softly, "let him speak for himself."

From a prelude of low, shuddering notes, like the rumble of distant thunder, there emerged — clear and tender — the opening bars of the serenade: a lilting, haunting air that caught at the heart because it sprang from the heart: low-toned at first, but swelling to a climax of impassioned yearning that broke upon the last note, almost as a voice breaks on the final word of an appeal foredoomed to fail —

Followed a weird scurrying interlude, like wind among leaves: and again, faintly crescendo, those shuddering notes as of distant storm.

Gabrielle saw it all, felt it all, as in a waking dream — the

sultry summer night, heavy with cloud, 'when there rose no moon at all. . . . Not a twinkle from the fly; Not a glimmer from the worm.' The darkened house, 'its windows fast and obdurate.' And down there in the garden — a shadow among shadows — the serenader, keeping his lonely tryst, pouring out his heart to the invisible She

'My love, my one, my all!'

Gabrielle scarcely knew whether voice or violin sang the words in her brain, as the haunting melody renewed its pleading, more insistent, more passionate than before. . . .

In some queer way she seemed linked with it all. The passion and the pleading broke in waves of melody against the door of her own closed heart. And the form in the garden —? A symbol merely — perhaps a portent — of the Grand Impulsion which so far had neither stirred the blood in her veins nor shaken the poise of her spirit. As yet, she was mistress in her own house; but something warned her she would not long remain so, if she listened to much more of that music. What did it want of her? Why would it not let her be?

Again and again the melody returned, with a Beethoven-like insistence and simplicity unashamed; rising like a fountain out of stormy minor interludes; luring her, irresistibly, toward what — toward whom —?

Only once she looked directly at Karl. His eyes were fixed on her; and a sudden conviction tingled through her that he was playing to no one present but herself. The discovery startled her out of her dream. She was back in the concert hall among the flags and the plants and the increasing aroma of woodbines —

Instinctively she looked round and caught Van's eyes also intent upon her face.

"What happened to you?" he asked, under his breath. "I spoke twice. — You never even heard me."

The blood ran up into her cheeks. "When people are playing, I listen to *them*," she said; and looked up again, with an altogether new interest, at the man who was the son of Jacko's enemy and Evan Blount's friend.

So strangely had his music softened her, that she suffered a twinge of self-reproach at thought of her ungracious greeting. If, as Derek said, he really hated the German connection, he might be sensitive about it. She remembered how he had tentatively tried to be friends with herself and Jack, and how they had snubbed his advances in their young, adamantine way. With Jacko enthroned in her heart, it was hard not to detest the very name of Schonberg. But Derek said he was straight; and certainly his music was wonderful. She would tell him so afterwards — try and atone.

It was nearing an end now. The air returning in a minor key grew fainter and fainter. Not a man stirred in the hall. From softness to softness the melody moved: piano, pianissimo: a queer, breaking sound like a snapped lutestring: and again that low shuddering note — a mere aftermath of storm. . . .

For at least two minutes the impressive silence held . . .

Then, as Karl reverently laid the violin to rest, the clapping began in earnest, and vociferous shouts of 'Encore!' Plainly overwhelmed, he smiled and bowed, rather stiffly, and descended the steps, in spite of wholesale remonstrance from the men.

Mrs. Macnair, in her impulsive fashion, went forward and shook hands with him heartily. Mark was not far behind her; and Gabrielle, seeing her chance, followed suit.

Still the clapping went on: and Sergeant Baird came up to them. "They're a' wantin' that tur-r-n agen, sir," he said; and Karl appealed mutely to Mrs. Macnair.

"I couldn't play it — like that, again."

"Of course you couldn't," she answered feelingly. "But it's a triumph. You moved them. A wonderful little thing: who wrote it?"

Karl grew redder than ever. "It's anonymous — unpublished — I'm fond of it. I wasn't sure if the men would care."

"Well, you have their answer! You simply must give them something else. Do you play Dvorak's things?"

"Yes — but I'm not top-hole at execution; and they need — the piano."

"Let me — please," Gabrielle interposed with eagerness unfeigned. "I've played them with my Uncle, in Canada."

"If you really — most kind of you —" Karl stammered, visibly overcome.

"But I shall be proud —"

"Well done, Gay!" Mark affectionately took hold of her arm. "She's the pillar of the show. Blount never let on you could play like that, Schonberg, or I'd have put you into the first programme."

"I should have scratched!" Karl answered, recovering his equanimity. "I'm only an amateur, though I've had good lessons — in Germany."

"And you have the spirit of it in you," murmured Gabrielle, who could not be generous by halves.

Karl Schonberg said nothing, but his eyes had the intent look that had arrested her when he was playing.

"May I?" he murmured politely, and offered his arm. She could not very well demur; and a mouse of a thought crept in that it would cancel any significance that might have been attached to her earlier surrender.

With her hand on his sleeve they went forward together. The strangeness of it struck home — and the inconsistency! Two hours earlier, she would have scouted the idea; but in the divine discord between words and actions she was very woman. She did not guess that the two brothers were watching her, as she went, with characteristically opposite thoughts in their hearts.

"Ready?" Karl asked when he had settled her at the piano.

She nodded, smiling up at him; with an air of confidence, that had not been there before, he tucked the beloved fiddle under his chin; and between them they brought down the house.

As they left the platform, Karl said boldly under cover of acclamations: "You have the true gift. It is a rare one, and too little recognized."

"It is the woman's gift, *par excellence!*" she answered, evad-

ing the personal note. "But women are not content to accompany these days."

"That means they are not content — to inspire. And if ever they give up that — God help the world!"

They were back among the others now — and congratulations rained.

Derek had slipped into Gabrielle's vacant seat; and Karl secured two chairs for himself and her, just near enough for Van to catch scraps of their talk that flourished amazingly in the interludes, while the men held the stage: — Cummins in his Charlie Chaplin turns, Baird, with his bagpipes and Highland fling; Barnes, at his brightest and best in an impromptu tub-thumping oration addressed to 'them that are watchin' tender o'er us,' and significantly christened 'Twistin' their Tails.'

Then it was Gabrielle again; and Van reassured himself with serene assurance.

"My turn, I think, Miss de Vigne," he said leaning towards her. "Set to partners — what? Karl, I depute you to amuse Dirks. I've been boring him stiff."

And, with his inimitable possessive air, he led her away.

When she had played 'How's every little thing in Dixie?' for a lively American Corporal — 'gone British for the duration' — her own moment arrived. The men gave her a rousing welcome as she stepped forward, her pulses fluttering, her head held high, because the mere gesture of confidence reacts on the spirit.

Van noticed that the violets at her breast moved unevenly: and he thought: "She's a shade nervous. But, by Jove — she's topping! The poise of her. A wicked shame to hide a throat like that in a cast-iron collar."

Then she began to speak in that clear, low-pitched voice of hers, with its touch of crispness that gave distinction to her least remark. "I am going to give you Kipling's 'France.'"

Fresh applause and shouts of 'Vive la France!' in very British accents.

For the first few stanzas her voice kept its level quietness:

then on a deeper note of passionate feeling — altogether new to Van — it carried her hearers, through the record of age-long strife between equal hearts and wills, to the greater glory of brotherhood in arms, and the sonorous echo of the opening lines:

“Broke to every known mischance; lifted over all
By the light, sane joy of life — the buckler of the Gaul.
Furious in luxury, Merciless in toil,
Terrible, with strength she draws from her tireless soil.
Strictest judge of her own worth, gentlest of man’s mind,
First to follow truth and last to leave old truths behind:
France — beloved of every soul that loves and serves its kind!”

At this point Van became aware that her gaze was fixed on Derek; that she seemed to be speaking those last lines directly to him. Half amused, half annoyed, he glanced sidelong at his brother; and discovered that Derek was looking straight back at her with a queer uplifted light in his eyes that Van — at all events — had never seen there before. A kind of super-coquette — was she? — bewitching them all with a twitch of her eloquent eyebrows, an inflection of her voice? Even old Karl seemed smitten. “Since when —?” he queried for the second time that evening.

Increasingly disturbed, he joined in calls for an encore, and this time she gave them an episode, ‘Beloved Vagabond’: — Paragot fiddling at a rustic wedding to fill the pockets of the unsuspecting and entirely-on-the-ground Blanquette de Veau. Now she was more like herself again. The lightness and swiftness, the French gaiety of it all, emphasized the very qualities Van most appreciated; the qualities that sharply differentiated her from the average woman of his own world.

With a minimum of gesture and inimitable inflections of tone, she set the whole quaint scene vividly before their eyes: — Paragot, in velveteens and rakish Alpine hat, fiddling as they went; Narcisse quarrelling furiously with his chiffon bow under a flower stall; the succulent wedding feast and *al fresco* dance; Paragot, *in excelsis*, putting the devil into the dancers’ feet;

greedy of adulation, however cheap, spurning its expression in francs and sous, when honest Blanquette — on the homeward journey — proffered him ‘the glittering treasure,’ only to discover that it was all her own: Blanquette herself — earnest and bewildered — an ‘astonishingly naked fowl’ on her lap — only prevented from weeping outright by the awful threat: ‘If you spill tears on the fowl it will be too salt and I shall throw it out of the window — !’

There she broke off — and the audience had their say again, at considerable length.

Van, going forward to receive her, was forestalled by Sergeant Baird with a bouquet of cowslips and violets.

“A token frae the war-rds, Nurse.” He thrust them at her, trying to bow at the same time. “They’re no gran’, but they’re bonny. The lads plucked them for-r ye the morrn.”

“Perfectly lovely,” she said, burying her face in them to cool her cheeks and hide her emotion. Then, mounting a few steps, she held her flowers aloft, bowing and smiling her thanks.

After that, Van securely annexed her, but there was little further chance of intimate talk.

A few more items from the men, and the ‘sing-song’ concluded with mild refreshments. The four women dispensed coffee and lemonade. The men crowded round the tables laughing and joking like a lot of overgrown schoolboys, completely at their ease; and the atmosphere became thicker than ever. Gabrielle, as proxy hostess, would permit no monopoly even to the favoured Van. But once, during a comparative lull at her corner, he slipped in his question about her necklace.

“Is it quite out of order,” he said in a lowered voice, “to ask who was responsible for your top-hole row of pearls?

“I rather think it is!” she rebuked him with a glance. “But there’s no mystery about them. My stepfather, who spoils me badly, had them collected for my twenty-first birthday. I fancy it took some years.”

“I can believe it. I’m a bit of a connoisseur. The Avon-leigh pearls are A1. So are those. And — *you* are worthy of them,” he added, so low that apparently she did not hear.

The shell-shock boy had come for more coffee and she kept him an endless age talking about the bouquet and his violets. Van privately considered she carried that sort of thing too far. He was not at all sure whether he would countenance this kind of work if —? Or was it when —? The tilt was becoming perilously acute —

Mark — sitting with Derek a little way off — kept an observant eye on them both, and approved of Gabrielle's graciousness to young Robin under Van's aristocratic nose.

"Our Gay is scoring quite a little triumph," he remarked presently. "I always knew the men were fond of her; but tonight they've kind of let themselves go. Schonberg's obviously struck. And the great Van appears to be trembling on the brink!"

Derek nodded. He happened to be looking in the same direction. "Some women seem to be natural-born magnets," he said with particular deliberation. "It's a two-edged gift. Hope she won't be spoilt by it all."

Mark laughed. "You old Puritan! Gay's not a child. And a little wholesome admiration is twice blest. I'll lay long odds she hasn't a notion she's been the making of my show. She has the true French gift — the mixture of brains and social sense that created the salons. Pure intuition. That's the beauty of it. Women made that way take 'some' spoiling."

Derek smiled and said nothing. Gabrielle herself was coming towards them —

CHAPTER VI

We can never judge another soul above the high-water mark of our own.

MAETERLINCK

THAT night Van lay awake for more than an hour after he had switched off his light: an event so rare as to be almost a portent. The surprises and mixed emotions of the evening had swept him forward faster than he had quite intended to go; and the new Gabrielle, whose acquaintance he had only just made, haunted his wakeful brain. The queenly look of her as she came to the edge of the stage, the unexpected beauty of her hair; and the thrill that seemed to run all through her when she spoke Kipling's majestic lines — each fresh vision emphasized his lurking conviction that, in common decency, he could no longer sit gracefully on the fence. He knew very well that he had not always shown such chivalrous consideration for the possible wife of the moment: But Miss de Vigne was different — enchantingly different! And there were other considerations urging him forward: vague doubts about Dirks; not to mention Karl, whose music had seemed to hypnotize her. Quite uncanny! Why the deuce had he never let on? At all events, Gay de Vigne was not for such as he; and the sooner he knew it, the better.

He, Van, would take Wynchcombe Friars on his way back; and — to be frank, he entertained no serious doubt as to her answer. Well — she was worth the price; and a fellow must pay it some time, for some woman. But, even for her, it was no light matter to give up his untrammelled freedom — and Léonie. A blow for her; and distinctly a wrench for himself. But — being Van — he dreaded the prospect of telling her a good deal more than the prospect of giving her up. On that point, at least, he did not waver. Stevenson was right. "When

a man marries, there is nothing for it — not even suicide, but to be good!" More especially, Van reflected sleepily, if he happens to marry a Gabrielle de Vigne! . . .

He woke early, with a sense of something tugging at his brain. He consulted his watch. Rotten luck! It seemed an age to breakfast time; and resetting his pillow, he coaxed oblivion. Not the remotest use. He felt ridiculously restless; and restlessness begot inspiration. It was a ripping morning. Why not get up on the chance, if a hot bath was available . . .?

She had to be up at some inhuman hour, to give those fellows their breakfast. Thoroughly good fellows, of course. But a woman like her! It was a bit too thick. Well — in a few days' time he might have the right to put his foot down. To-day — perhaps — if he chanced to meet her in the garden. Nothing like striking when the mood was on —!

He did not meet her in the garden. He only met a mildly astonished housemaid in the hall. The empty terrace beyond the shadow of the house was drenched in spring sunshine; and the crisp, May morning air had a faint scent of wallflowers. A mass of them were out under the drawing-room window. Queer sensation getting up so early. Rather like arriving at a ball before one's hostess. Everything ready and empty and waiting —

If only he had her beside him now and they could stroll down those steps into the pinewood, he felt convinced he could pull it through. Decidedly the mood was on —! But she was not beside him, worse luck. She was fooling about in wards where a dozen men had slept, or giving them breakfast — including Dirks. Lucky devil, Dirks! A wonder he hadn't succumbed himself before now.

Not the least use hanging about. So he went down into the pinewood alone: and returned with a very prosaic appetite for breakfast. Still no one about, except that pasty-looking shell-shock boy near the front door, jiggling a perambulator — of all unlikely vehicles! Tired of his own company, Van gave him

a friendly greeting and discovered that the occupant of the vehicle was a foreign-looking infant with eyes like sloes and a crop of thick black hair.

"What kind of a surprise packet is this?" he asked with mild facetiousness. "The latest thing in convalescents — eh?"

The boy grinned and ogled his lively charge.

"Lord, no, sir! Nothin' much wrong with 'im. 'E's Nurse de Vigne's baby — 'e is — the little ripper!"

Van stared at him in speechless amazement.

"Miss de Vigne's . . . ?" he echoed; and could not bring himself to complete the crazy conjunction.

"Just so, sir," the boy confirmed him gravely. "Come along with 'er from France, 'e did. She thinks the world of 'im. I took 'im over a minute, so's the girl Anna-Marree could go an' find 'er — "

"Talk of an angel," murmured Van strictly to himself. For on the word, Gabrielle appeared at the front door, her whole face tenderly illumined — for him? Not at all. That was easily seen by her start of recognition and her ghost of a blush.

"Down so early! Good-morning," she said; and lifting his cap, he went forward.

"I say, Forsyth's too casual with these chaps," he protested low and hurriedly. "Young Robin, there, is talking moonshine about that foreign kid — belonging to you — "

To his dismay she laughed outright. "Moonshine indeed! Have I never mentioned him? He's my little *piou-piou* — my soldier of France — "

At that point the embryo warrior gurgled invitingly and flourished a pair of brown fists.

"Ah, *cheri* — *pauvre petit!*" And, deserting the bewildered Van, she flew to the creature, and leaned over it, cooing French baby-talk, her face all tenderness — a picture to delight the eye and stir the heart.

But Van's eye was not delighted, nor his heart stirred. Half a dozen words of greeting for himself — not a syllable of explanation — and there she was, fussing over a stray kid under the eyes of that half-addled boy. It was an utterly unlooked-

for aberration of the kind he was least able to condone. He felt angrier with her than he would have believed possible a couple of hours ago —!

Once she glanced towards him; but he stood his ground, twisting his moustache, awaiting the appearance of Anne-Marie. The pause gave him time to calm down. He must treat the thing lightly — exercise tact. In that last he rarely failed: but then — he was seldom so deeply moved.

Thank Heaven! The girl at last! After some injunctions and further caresses, the infant was wheeled away towards the rose-garden escorted by the shell-shock boy.

Gabrielle's smiling eyes looked straight into his own; but she did not move a step towards him.

"Such a pathetic little mite!" she said. "Not a belonging in the world."

"Better off than some of 'em anyway," Van answered, coming forward. "*You* seem to be making ample amends."

"Feeble amends," she corrected him. "The most one can do in such a case is less than nothing."

"As to that — I'm no judge. But — am I allowed to ask, How — when — and where?"

"Naturally!" She seemed pleased that he cared to hear. Even now she was thinking chiefly of that confounded kid. "As to where — it was in a dressing-station. As to when — it was about two months before I left France." They had moved towards the balustrade, on which she seated herself, pressing her hands palm-downwards on the rough stone. "One of our wounded Tommies brought in a bundle over which he was touchingly solicitous. He called it his 'bit o' luggage'; and, opening a corner of the bundle, showed me the little dark head. It was so little — so lost, it caught at my heart. He told me it had rolled unnoticed out of a cart packed with French refugees. He was lying there wounded and thought nothing about it, till a thin sound came from the bundle. Then he dragged himself into the road and found it was a baby, a few months old. The cart, of course, had disappeared; so the good fellow cherished it and kept it warm till he was 'collected' and brought in. You

wouldn't believe the fuss he made of his 'little souvenir.' And when his turn came to pass on, he couldn't bear leaving it. The only way I could comfort him was to promise I would take charge of it and keep it myself — if no parents were ever found. So the *pauprre petit* was solemnly bestowed on me, as a parting gift; and two months afterwards the poor fellow was killed."

Van emitted a murmur of sympathy. "But how about you?" he added, after a pause. "Landed with a stray unaccountable infant —"

Her smile, at that so characteristic question, had in it a suspicion of pity — or was it contempt?

"France is so full of 'unaccountable infants' that one more or less scarcely excites remark," she said; and he detected a changed note in her voice. "Of course I could not see after it while I worked in hospital; so a friend took him home for me to Mrs. Macnair, who works among refugees, on the bare chance that some one might be found to claim him. I don't suppose any one ever will."

"And — in that case?"

"Naturally, I keep my treasure-trove. He was a gift. I promised."

"But — why —" He hesitated and was lost.

"*Why* —? Because I've a woman's heart in my body and French blood in my veins!" she flashed out, her cheeks on fire, the sparks alight in her eyes.

Van, being unobservant, had not noticed the orange flecks; and their swift ignition completely took him aback. He had not dreamed she could be a spitfire; and he looked aggrieved. "I hadn't finished my sentence. You might give a fellow a chance. I only meant why — in *this* way? Aren't there plenty of homes and things?"

"Of course there are, for creatures no one cares about. But I happen to care for the child." She rose to her feet, very erect and dignified. "We are not talking the same language. And I ought to be getting back to my work."

But as she moved away, he followed, divided between anger and dismay. He *had* failed in tact after all — and failed badly.

"Miss de Vigne," he urged, "honour bright, I never meant to vex you. But your generosity blinds you a bit —"

He broke off there, in impotent vexation. Derek and Karl were coming out of the house.

Confounding their intrusion, he hoped — vainly — that they had not noticed anything amiss. He was leaving soon after breakfast. He *must* get in another word with her somehow. Had she been simply amusing herself? Didn't she care a rap whether he was choked off by that beastly baby or not?

There she was making herself no end charming to old Karl, who couldn't keep his eyes off her face. That was more than he could stand, just then: and suddenly it struck him that a word with Derek might not be amiss. If Dirks knew he hated the whole thing — and had an inkling of the reason why — he might make himself useful, being on the spot.

So, ignoring Karl and Miss de Vigne, he slipped a hand through Derek's arm. "Come for a stroll, old chap," he said. "We're off directly after breakfast."

"What's in the wind?" thought Derek, knowing his Van.

He was not left long in doubt. After a brief preamble, Van came to business. "I say, Dirks," he began in a confidential tone, "what the devil are Forsyth and his wife up to, encouraging Miss de Vigne in her romantic notions about that infant she's picked up in France?"

Derek began to see light. "Better ask Mark yourself," he said. "It's not a Sergeant's place to lecture his C.O.!"

But Van was in no mood for chaff.

"Don't talk piffle. And don't come the bally Sergeant over me! There was young Robin presenting the creature to me as 'Nurse de Vigne's baby.' Sentimental rot! Putting herself in a false position. You might rub it in when you're off duty, so to speak. I'm in earnest over this affair; and — well — *you* understand how that sort of thing rubs me up. A woman's good name —"

Derek gave him a quick look. "Miss de Vigne's good name is in no danger *here*."

"I never said it was. But — the look of the thing. You know what I mean —"

"I ought to by this time," said Derek with his baffling gravity. "In the best circles — it's not done! If it really upsets you I'll do what I can. But she's her own mistress and she has a particular sentiment for the child."

"Yes. That's the deuce of it."

"Generally is — with women," murmured the sapient Derek; and at that moment the blurred resonance of the gong reached their ears. "Breakfast, old man," he said briskly. "Mustn't be late. They're punctual here."

"Late! I've been rolling round since eight o'clock, and I'm starving. We must be off soon after ten. Au revoir — when the gods permit."

"I thought it was to-morrow."

"If I can fit things in. I'll ring up."

At breakfast, Gabrielle sat near Mark, and they kept up a lively flow of talk, chiefly about 'the show,' to Van's quite unreasonable annoyance.

When the meal was over, he saw her slip out with a garden basket and scissors. He thought: "The basket's a blind. She's after that infant." And slipping out himself, he came up with her halfway to the rose garden.

She turned with a start. "What is it?"

For a second, he looked — and felt — uncomfortable. Then his native assurance triumphed.

"It's only — we'll be off soon. And — I wanted to say — if I put the wrong foot forward, please forgive me. And — do reconsider things a bit. I'm not asking you to chuck the kid; only to drop — the personal touch."

She shook her head.

"Not even — for my sake?" he ventured boldly. And at that she drew in her lip.

"I don't want to seem ungracious. But I can make no promises — no conditions. You see — I *love* the child —"

Van sighed. He was honestly puzzled. "I admit — I can't understand —"

She smiled. "I suppose — only a woman could! Besides — if I make promises, I keep them. Good-bye."

In spite of annoyance and bewilderment, Van held her hand longer than usual; and fancied — but could not swear to it — that his pressure was returned.

CHAPTER VII

That which we have not dared to risk is most surely lost of all.

MAETERLINCK

VAN drove down to Avonleigh feeling phenomenally out of love with himself and life. Not a single item of his very reasonable expectations had been fulfilled. Miss de Vigne, for all her breeding and her charm — not to mention her bank account — had shown signs of being an enigma, also a spitfire. And he had small use for either as a wife. Only a few hours earlier it had been: ‘Line clear. Full steam ahead.’ Now it was: ‘Grade crossing. Go slow!’ That she could risk losing him for the sake of a foundling baby! He wouldn’t have believed it of her. And the way she fussed over it; the look in her eyes when she said, ‘I love the child,’ so maddened him that, in the dustiest corner of his worldly soul, a despicable suspicion reared its head. He scotched it instantly; angry with himself; angrier still with her; angriest of all with the helpless infant, who had dared to roll out of that cart and become a stone of stumbling in his path. He had half a mind to go back on Sunday and tell her outright that she must choose between him and that beastly infant. And again he had half a mind to stay away for some weeks. Bring her to her senses, and trust Dirks to clear the course. But he was in no mood for making decisions. He felt thoroughly unsettled and aggrieved. . . .

So he sat silent, impervious to the beauty of the morning, idly studying Karl’s impassive profile and wondering: “*Is it a sudden smite? Or is it a case of the worm i’ the bud . . .?*”

Being a Blount, he refrained from embarrassing his friend by so intimate a question; and Karl also remained silent, apparently intent on the car. He thoroughly enjoyed handling the wheel; but it struck him that Van was pretty lavish with his

petrol, considering the restrictions. How the dickens did he come by it all? Like Van, however, he refrained from undue curiosity; the more readily because his mind was elsewhere, and his uplifted heart soaring like a lark in the blue.

For Karl Schonberg loved Gabrielle de Vigne with the sentimental adoration of the German — before marriage — and the quiet tenacity of the Englishman. Since the far-off day, when her hair had floated like a dusky cloud about her shoulders, she had been enshrined in his heart as the Unattainable Princess, enchantingly remote: so remote, that the passing loves and passions of adolescence could perfectly well co-exist with his deeper, unchanging allegiance. For Karl was by nature amorous. As music was the wine of life, so woman was the bread of life: and at Oxford there had been many stars of the second and third magnitude. But the existence of one secret star, that out-shone them all, had not even been suspected by Van, of whose utilitarian attitude to women Karl frankly disapproved. And through it all, he had never quite lost hope that, some day, he might overcome Gabrielle's antipathy to his father's race and name.

The blow of her unexpected call to Canada had driven him, very nearly, to speak out and risk refusal. But, to begin with, he saw no hope. To go on with, he was determined to achieve a position, independent of his father, before confessing all and demanding all.

And lo — before she returned, his unspoken question had been answered, in terrible fashion, by the thunder of German guns in Belgium, and England's Call to Arms. If he knew anything of her — and he did not know a great deal — she would ignore the English mother he had worshipped and see only his painfully conspicuous German father.

So, for the time being, she had vanished out of his life. He had known she was at Wynchcombe Friars: and, since Derek's arrival, had been tempted more than once to write and ask if he might run over and see him. Yet always at the last he shrank from the actual encounter. But Van's casual suggestion, and Sir Mark's request for music, had proved more than

mortal man could resist. Here was a chance — amazing, unlooked-for — of playing to her, and her only, the 'Serenade,' inspired by her, written to her —

The rest would neither know nor understand. But she, with her delicate woman's instinct, might possibly guess —

And now — the thing was done: the Great Moment over! Though her greeting had cut him to the quick, his music had wrought a miracle and evoked divine response. Even if no more came of it, that one triumphant hour was a jewel of memory that no man could take from him.

It had been something of a jar to find that Van himself was in the field. It emphasized, unpleasantly, the break in their intimacy; and — jealousy apart — it fired him to chivalrous indignation. Van — he felt convinced — was after her money. Presumably he had failed with Miss Doreen; and, simply as a business proposition, was looking elsewhere. The mere thought of it goaded Karl, almost, to speak up and tell her how *he* had waited and worked, all these years, on the bare chance of winning her. It seemed unbearable that Van, who had run after many strange goddesses, should step in at the eleventh hour and — by virtue of his race and heritage — have her for the asking —

Certainly something was amiss on the terrace. And Van's silence was phenomenal. Karl decided that a few diplomatic feelers would be legitimate — perhaps fruitful.

"You seem rather hipped, old chap!" he said sympathetically, slackening speed that the car might take the long incline without straining her gear. "Had a bad night?"

Van, who was lighting a cigarette, turned a speculative eye on him.

"I'm not quite so far gone as to indulge in *nuits blanches*," he said cryptically. "Preening your feathers — are you — after last night's little triumph? Why have *I* never been honoured?"

Karl reddened. "Oh, you know very well," he said in a changed tone. "You don't really care a rap for it. Those fellows did."

"Quite. So, by the way, did Miss de Vigne. Did you

happen to notice? You hypnotized her. Give you my word."

Karl grew redder than ever. He thought: "Did I hopelessly give myself away?"

And Van thought: "It's taken him pretty badly. Does he imagine he has a ghost of a chance? — If it wasn't for this cursed hitch about the kid, it would be fairer on old Karl to make my intentions clear." But between the compromising situation, and Gabrielle's tacit disregard of his wishes, his ardour of the morning had sensibly cooled. So he merely added, after a pause: "Wasn't it Benedick who thought it damned queer that sheep's guts could hale the souls out of men's bodies? With the assistance of your precious fiddle you seem to have made quite a haul in that line."

Karl grunted. "They were awfully kind. Sir Mark asked me to come again soon."

"Going to make a regular thing of it — what?"

Karl looked round deliberately and Van detected, not for the first time, a hint of Schonberg's sleepy power in his eyes. There were moments when he found his unassailably good-tempered friend the most exasperating man in the three Kingdoms. "I shall go, if I'm wanted — whenever I can," he said.

"Jolly good of you! I had a notion you were too busy to find time for 'scooting round the county.'"

"A good deal depends on the errand. *You* seem to find time for driving the men out. Why the deuce shouldn't I fiddle to them, if they care to hear?"

Van's wink said plainly: "Tell that to the Marines!" His lips said: "And the rest — eh? Let 'em hear by all means, so long as you don't get neglecting Avonleigh."

Karl's face stiffened; a flash of temper lightened in his eyes. "There's a limit to what I'll put up with, Van — even from you. I'm doing my job, and something over. If you're not satisfied with my services — you can dispense with them."

Van stared in blank amazement. Karl in revolt would never do —

"What's up, old man?" he said, with his most disarming smile.

"If my harmless remark makes you see red — it's a wash-out. You know jolly well that neither Avonleigh nor I could get along without you."

But Karl was only half mollified. "If that's so, you might give me credit for managing my own affairs without detriment to yours."

"Right-o!" murmured Van; and said no more till they had swept down the far side of the hill and were back on level ground again. Then he remarked conversationally: "By the way, I've news for you — about Burnt Hill House."

Karl suppressed his start of surprise. "Old Bridgman's breaking up and your father doesn't feel quite satisfied about his domestics."

"He isn't singular in *that* sensation," Karl remarked quietly.

"Oh, I know there are wild tales. But Schonberg's considered opinion is another pair of sleeves. Anyway, when he was down there on Thursday, he persuaded Bridgman to clear 'em out neck and crop. The old fellow goes to Torquay — with a handsome honorarium. By shutting up the house, at least we shall shut the gossips' mouths. He's a useful friend — your father."

But Karl harked back to the main point. "And the fishy pair — what's come to them?"

"Haven't the foggiest! And I don't care a damn, so long as we're quit of them."

Karl suppressed a smile. "It's a good move," was all he said. "It would have been a better move still — a year ago." As they neared the turning to the Hall, he added: "If you don't mind taking her on, I'll walk home and send up later for my valise."

"Why not come along to the Hall?"

"No time, thanks. There'll be piles of arrears." He stopped the car, secured his violin case, and sprang out.

"Not still in a huff, are you, Karl?" Van asked with affectionate concern.

"No. But I run straight — and I like to be treated accordingly."

"You'll never be treated otherwise by me. I'm jolly glad you enjoyed yourself and scored a hit."

With which generous *amende* he set the car purring and was soon out of sight.

Karl's zeal to tackle those arrears cooled considerably, once he was alone in his sanctum. It was a hybrid room that revealed the twofold nature of the man: the practical worker, with his meticulous German brain; and the artist, with his love of beauty and comfort, his weakness for the feminine touch, even to a vase of flowers on his desk. There were good pictures, well-bound books, and capacious cushions in his lonely chair by the fireplace — its gaping emptiness stacked with pots of ferns. Into this chair he flung himself; and there lay motionless — while the minute hand crept round the face of the clock.

Next week he would see her and play to her again. How if he were to win her, simply through his violin? It was the kind of romantic idea that caught his fancy. But his common-sense brain said: 'Rot! Van would be at the goal before you and your fiddle had won halfway.' And Van didn't deserve her. He would take her for granted, as he took Avonleigh for granted and all the other good things that accrued to him without effort. Whereby it will be seen that Karl's old admiration of his friend had been unconsciously disintegrated by that gentleman himself. In time of peace, one could be mildly amused by his foibles, his unassailable serenity; and love him none the less. But, when the hurricane of war — that quickens the spirit, while it destroys the body — seemed scarcely to stir one metaphorical hair of his head, amusement had changed to impatience. If he had said little, it was merely because the unexpected intrusion of his father had tied his tongue.

Was ever man — he wondered with increasing bitterness — more distractingly placed? That his father, whom he innately distrusted, should have chosen the very eve of war to embark upon a calculated intimacy with his own closest friend! That he should further be compelled to stand by and watch Van placidly giving himself away: and more than himself, for aught

Karl knew! There were times when he half crazed his brain with wondering how far Schonberg's good-humoured contempt for British character and policy cloaked active hostility: how much harm he was doing under cover of England's tolerant credulity and his own secret hold on political and financial strings. In such moods Karl had often been tempted to throw aside his aloofness, openly tackle his father and denounce him to Van. But hitherto that brave impulse had been checked partly by foreknowledge of failure, partly by the inherent spirit of his mother, who had never stood up to her formidable husband; and had regarded him, as a Brobdignagian being, not to be judged by the standards of lesser men. So Karl had grown up half admiring, half fearing and, of late, wholly distrusting his inscrutable father. It was not a happy state of things; and as the War looked like dragging indefinitely on — he began to ask himself how it would end . . .

As to this sudden descent on Burnt Hill House — what the devil was behind it all? Why had that suspicious trio — left unmolested for months — been blown to the winds by a word from his father's mouth? The inference was so distasteful that Karl tried hard to look the other way. Persistent gossip had reached him lately of a wireless installation, in addition to the old talk of lights and explosives. He had stoutly negatived the rumour and had done his best to stamp it out; and all the while, a voice in his brain whispered: 'It may be true. Speak up . . . it may be true.' Now there sprang the horrid question — had that same rumour and the danger of discovery prompted the real offender to cover his tracks by the simple process of shifting his tools elsewhere? The inherent likelihood of the thing, and Van's complacent deafness to obvious creakings of machinery, maddened him. Yet, he had not an ounce of proof to back his unfilial suspicions, which might conceivably have sprung from the German kink in his own brain.

"After all," he thought, rising and stretching himself, "if Van *will* keep his blooming eyes bunged up, sooner than put his back into things, it's not for me to throw suspicion on my own father —"

He was none the happier for that conclusion, though it absolved him from action. He went straight to his desk; and, ignoring the pile of envelopes that clamoured for attention, spent half an hour writing to Derek.

The inevitable allusion to his father was brief and guarded: "A very sudden move and all done on the quiet — chiefly, I gather, at my father's instigation. Being down here a good deal, I suppose he heard the sort of talk that goes on and was more successful than we were in convincing Van! I would like to feel sure that the precious pair are in police custody. Van knows nothing about them, and cares less! But I confess I'm curious. He seems doubtful about returning via Wynchcombe Friars to-morrow. Curiouser still!"

As he stamped and addressed the envelope he found himself thinking: "If only Derek was in Van's shoes! If only there were more of his sort in our unwieldy councils —!"

But he had wasted too much time already in vain visions: and lighting a pipe he proceeded to tackle his arrears in earnest.

CHAPTER VIII

*Lose who may, I still can say —
Those who win heaven, blest are they.*

BROWNING

ON Sunday morning Derek was favoured with two communications from Avonleigh. In addition to Karl's letter, with its strange, if satisfactory news, there was a brief note from Van.

DEAR OLD BLIGHTER,—

I'm afraid after all I can't manage Wynchcombe Friars in my stride. Give Miss de Vigne my very best regards. Tell her how sorry I am to defer the pleasure — and all that. I think she understood I might be prevented. Anyway, say polite things for me as prettily as your natural talent for not saying them will permit! You may be interested to hear that Bridgman has definitely crumpled up and we are shipping the poor chap off to Torquay. He sacked his domestics without ceremony — at Schonberg's instigation. Hope *that* trifling fact may give you to think, and take some of the stiffening out of your neck muscles. I'm sending Forsyth a polite scrawl. Can't say when I shall manage another trip. But I'll let you know, old boy.

Yours ever

VAN

P. S.— Remember what I said about that kid. It's not fair on Miss de Vigne. Just a bit of misplaced sentiment. I gave her credit for more common sense. — V. B.

Derek found a chance to deliver his message after breakfast, when Gabrielle was tidying the ward.

She received it with an amused twitch of her charming brows. "Those committeees!" she murmured, shaking her head at a photograph she was dusting. "Where *should* we be without them? Even Mr. Blount can't resist the spell."

"But he's very disappointed," Derek urged, making a heroic

effort to say the polite thing in the proper tone of voice. "May I tell him — you are sorry too?"

"Certainly — if you think my sorrow will ease his disappointment!"

"That sounds unkind."

She smiled at him with her eyes. "It was not unkindly meant." She was silent a moment needlessly polishing the glass of her frame. Then: "I have a confession to make," she said without looking up.

"Well?"

He stood watching her with a flutter of expectation, to which he was a stranger. He found her very baffling this morning.

"I was unjust, ungenerous to your Karl. Instead of snapping your head off — I ought to have known you were sure to be right. Jacko trusted your judgment always."

"But he never liked Karl?"

"No. Did you — in those days?"

"Not much. I never gave him a chance."

"Nor did we. Can't young things be cruel? I was glad Mark asked him down again."

"So was he. I heard from him, too, this morning. The whole thing cheered him up, no end. I'm glad you've recanted, on his account — and Van's."

She gave him an odd look. "Are you very devoted — you two? In Jamesian language, you are each so amazingly other!"

Derek smiled. "Yet I think we're fonder than most brothers. Van can be very aggravating; but in the right mood, he's very lovable."

She nodded, smiling to herself. Then setting down her picture, she said briskly. "Now I must go and dispense rations and get ready for church. Are you for the wagonette? Or can you manage the walk?"

He sighed. "Not yet, worse luck! I suppose I shall — some day."

"Of course you will. Look at the improvement since you arrived."

Her baffling mood was gone: and with a smile of frankest

friendship she left him — a prey to vaguely disturbing sensations that he was doing his valiant best to ignore. Van had said he meant business. His own share in it was to clear up this difficulty about the child. Unauthorized sensations had no say in the matter. And anyway — what chance would a man have? He glanced with disfavour at his offending limb and ill-clad person.

Karl's letter provided ample food for thought along more legitimate lines. If they had all been mistaken about old Schonberg — so much the better. But it would take proofs a good deal more convincing to unstiffen the muscles of his neck. Meantime, the hitch in Van's smooth-running courtship held the field —

Two weeks passed without word or sign from him; also, it must be confessed, without a word from Derek to Mark or Sheila about the child. It was such a distractingly difficult and delicate subject. He felt convinced nothing would come of it but futile friction with Mark. And, after all, it was Van's affair. Why the devil should he, Derek, be called upon to thrust a clumsy finger into it? He had overstepped the limit, in that line, on his own account; and, in the process, had become heartsick and disillusioned. Yet still the incurable impulse to help goaded him like a force outside his control. It was an idiotic muddle all round; and really rather stupid of Miss de Vigne —

But he found it did not do to start criticizing her. It revived sensations that must be ruthlessly damped down. He had learnt, in a hard school, to be master of his thoughts and passions; and — in spite of that luckless infant — he practically regarded her as Van's future wife. He inclined more and more to the belief that she 'cared.' Since the night of the concert he had detected a change. She seemed to have drawn about her, more closely than ever, her delicate, impervious mantle of reserve.

Altogether it was not a happy fortnight for Derek; though the sun of May shone clear and his lungs were improving steadily; though he worked with Mark in the studio now; and

together, they tilted at windmills on behalf of hardly used officers and men. The first blissful sense of having slipped into a backwater was deserting him. Even in a backwater there is scope for passion and effort and tragedy. Though a man's body be thrust out of the arena, there can be no escape from the inexorable urge of life. Fate, that had forgotten him, seemed astir again; casting her shadow on before.

And on the 8th came an awful reverberation from the outer world of War — the cold-blooded sinking of the *Lusitania* —

On the 10th, Karl reappeared, with fiddle and suitcase, and gave them a musical evening of the first order. Gabrielle played for him untiringly; and it was easily seen that the good fellow was in the seventh heaven.

"Karl smitten too!" thought Derek, with a pang of fellow-feeling. "Better for him, perhaps, if she'd stuck to her prejudice."

But Karl took no such view of the matter. He had loved so long unrequited, that he could drink his unexpected cup of happiness without losing his head. Only when she asked for his 'Serenade,' and sat entranced while he played it, did a passing madness of hope take hold of him: and afterwards, when the party adjourned on to the moonlit terrace, he deliberately took possession of her, deliberately manoeuvred a partial isolation from the rest. The spell of his music was still upon her, as her first words proved.

"Your melody haunts one," she said, "like a voice, pleading — pleading —"

"That's the idea," he answered, in a low tone.

"Has your friend written other things?"

"Not many. Nothing as good as that."

"But he *ought* to write more. And he ought to publish. Is he — German? His music suggests it."

"He is half German — like myself."

She smiled on him very kindly. "And the right sort — like yourself? Do you know him intimately? I am interested."

A pause. Then Karl looked very straight at her. "I have known him intimately — since the moment he was born."

"Mr. Schonberg!" She caught her breath. "But how wonderful! And why make this mystery — hiding your light under a bushel?"

"Only *this* light," he said, his eyes on her face: "for a reason not every one would understand. The 'Serenade' came to me from Some One Else. I had never played it to any one till that night. Fate sent me a chance — and I could not resist —" His gaze, and the catch in his voice enlightened her.

"No — no. Not that," she murmured, pained and overwhelmed.

"But it *is* that," he assured her gravely. "It has never been anything else — all these years. There was a time — I hoped. But now — I suppose —?"

He broke off on a questioning note; and she shook her head, looking away from him over a blurred vision of pine tops, pearl-grey and black beneath an unclouded moon.

"Oh, but I'm sorry. Things were so pleasant. I felt I had been unjust to you. I was trying to atone — And this — upsets everything —"

"I hope not. For me — it glorifies everything. And for you — why should it make any difference, except —"

"Except — that we have become friends," she said, genuinely moved; and no one being near she gave him her hand.

He held it in a close, reverent clasp. The German in him was tempted to stoop and touch it with his lips; but his English instincts and training jibbed at the least hint of the theatrical. Tightening his hold a little, he answered quietly: "To hear *you* say that is, for me, the second best thing in the world. The most I could hope for with my unlucky name and — Van in the field."

Their hands fell apart. Mark and Sheila were coming towards them.

Next morning, before he left, Derek asked him unconcernedly: "Has Van been to Avonleigh much this fortnight? We haven't had a sight of him."

And Karl said: "No more have we. He gets a Town fit,

now and then; especially this time of year. Even with a war on and no social functions, the season is sacred for Van!"

That was all; and Derek thought: "He's a fool, and worse, shilly-shallying with a splendid woman, simply on account of that child. Or *was* there some sort of clash? Looked rather like it —"

But a note from Van himself extinguished that dim hope, before the week was out.

DEAR OLD D. [he wrote],—

How wags the world with you? London keeps a cheery face on, in spite of things going slow out there. One way and another I've been tied by the leg; and petrol restrictions are the devil. But it's high time I came your way again. I must work some business at Avonleigh next week-end! Has Miss de Vigne so much as noticed my absence? And have you said anything yet to any one about that superfluous kid? Or are you shirking? Love to the lot of you—*except* the kid. Hope I manage Saturday.

Yours (with a brotherly embrace)

VAN

P. S.—Do play up, old chap. You are Forsyth's pal. It's easier for you — and I'm keen.

That note did more than extinguish hope. It spurred Derek to self-reproach and prompt action. His lurking annoyance gave place to an almost fatherly concern for the brother who knew nothing of obstacles, or how to fight them. Somehow, these days, he felt years older than Van; and that letter, with its rare under-note of eagerness and uncertainty, increased the sensation. It did not sound as if Van were hanging back; but as if he really cared and felt uncertain of his chances — a phenomenon of the first order! That tentative question about Miss de Vigne was so unlike him — and very difficult to answer. Since the concert, she had scarcely spoken of him, except when his name happened to crop up; and Derek was too ignorant of women to have any idea what that might bode.

For a time the child had not appeared so often, but this last

week it had come nearly every day. In a way that made it easier to speak; though it did not make him the less reluctant. Besides, he had grown rather fond of the creature. He had made shy overtures to it; and once — when only Anne-Marie was by — he had boldly taken it in his arms. Since then, it had kicked and gurgled at sight of him, and he had felt absurdly pleased. It was the hidden streak of the woman in him — a streak that, in natures inherently masculine, creates the pick of men. However — since the thing must be done, no time like the present.

On the terrace, after breakfast, the baby-carriage was conveniently in evidence; and when Mark joined him for a smoke, before they tackled their correspondence, Derek was ready for the plunge.

For a time they talked War news, sitting and smoking on the balustrade in full sunshine.

Then — while Derek was fumbling for the right word — the perambulator reappeared at the far end of the terrace. The hood was down; the child sitting up bareheaded, hugging a woolly rabbit with abnormal ears. Gabrielle, coming up from the wood with a party of men, ran to welcome the creature. The men shouted friendly 'Cheeros' and passed on into the house; while Gabrielle leaned over the perambulator and made much of the child. It was a charming picture; one that obviously gave Derek his cue. But it was Mark who spoke first.

"Coming on finely — eh? — our fragment of France."

"Yes — he's a jolly little chap."

The sympathetic note in Mark's voice was disconcerting; and before he had found the right word, Mark went on: "I believe he gave your very correct brother rather a shock? Sheila happened to be at her window that morning, when he was confronted with young Robin and the infant. His face must have been worth seeing! And when Gay appeared, Sheila says there was something in the nature of a scene. As he hasn't turned up since, I'm wondering if he's nursing his injuries. Have you heard?"

"When Mark talked like that, Derek was apt to feel prickly; and the sensation at this moment was a distinct advantage.

"I heard this morning," he said, ignoring flippant speculations. "He's been busy lately, but he hopes to come on Saturday."

"And 'win or lose it all'?" Mark enquired, unabashed. Between ourselves, old man, I was rather hoping the *piou-piou* might have choked him off."

"And between ourselves," retorted Derek, with a kindling eye, "your attitude to Van strikes me as unjust and lopsided, which it's not your nature to be. If he *has* objections on that score, they're natural enough. It's charming of Miss de Vigne to take the child under her wing; but — well — I should have thought — you might have given her a hint — or Sheila —

Mark shook his head. "Sheila agrees with me that the infant may be doing Gay a good turn!"

Derek rose impatiently. "I wouldn't have believed it of *her*. And you both seem to ignore the fact that Miss de Vigne may — care. You must admit it's a delicate subject for him to tackle. And if no one gives her a hint, she may stand to lose — what she most values, simply through not realizing —"

"Oh, clear out! Why not tell her yourself if you're so dead certain and so keen?"

Mark also swung himself up, and for a moment they confronted each other in a sort of amicable defiance. The clash of their mutual honesty was apt to produce these intermittent storms. Yet, through it all, their great friendship remained unruffled. It was founded on that very honesty.

Derek drew in his lip and was silent, considering Mark's unwelcome proposition. Then: "It's a woman's job," he urged. "It would come better from Sheila."

But Mark was adamant. "It would worry her. And I won't have her worried. Besides," he added with a twinkle, "I really *do* think it's your job! You're partial to Van. We aren't. And I'm damned if I'll pretend we are." He glanced at his watch. "Time we were getting to work. But — there's

your chance to hand. I give you half an hour to pull it through." His hand came down on Derek's shoulder. "Don't take my ravings amiss, old man. You're the best brother in creation. And if you can prove their hearts are involved — well, we won't refuse them our blessing!"

CHAPTER IX

It is in our past that Destiny finds all her weapons, her vestments, her jewels.

MAETERLINCK

The real revelations are the unconscious ones.

E. ROBINS

DEREK, left alone, stood irresolute for several minutes, taking prodigious pulls at his pipe, as if the right word, and the courage to speak it, could be drawn from that magic bowl. Also, at difficult moments, his breathing still troubled him and induced a horrid fear that his voice might fail him at some critical juncture. He was thinking: "In a way, Mark's right. It is my job. She's Jacko's sister. Van's my brother. Why the dickens am I such a tongue-tied fool?"

And, away at the end of the terrace, Gabrielle was holding the rabbit high in air, crooning some French nursery ditty. Then with a swift downward rush, with laughter and kisses and small shrieks of glee, Bunny came home to roost, only to escape afresh and repeat the thrilling game. To Derek, watching them, the girl was a vision of motherhood incarnate. Men, he reflected, can neither understand these things nor trespass on them. And in his own case — if Mark only knew — if he so much as guessed — he would never have set him such a hard row to hoe —

At this point a break in the game made Gabrielle aware of him: and she beckoned with the Bunny, inviting him to come and share the fun.

"She's simply asking for it!" thought Derek, fortifying himself with a flick of humour; and squaring his shoulders, he went forward valiantly, trying to walk as if there were no such thing as a lame hip joint in the world.

He succeeded so well that she greeted him with applause.

"Splendid! Almost like your old self. And isn't *Le Petit* splendid too, this morning? Please admire!"

She wagged Bunny's ears at the creature; and Derek gravely contributed a forefinger, that was seized and turned to practical account.

"Take care! He can bite," warned Gabrielle, with a touch of mother pride in the phenomenon, that went to Derek's heart.

"I'll take my chance," he said, with his eyes on the child. The vigorous suction of its soft warm lips sent a queer thrill up his arm.

"Time for walk and sleep," Gabrielle interposed, in her practical vein. "He doesn't look much like sleep, the villain; but we'll see."

The villain was laid flat with gentle admonitions; Bunny arranged in his arms and the white awning adjusted. Then she leaned over him, murmuring French love-words between her kisses. It was all desperately disconcerting to one who saw woman as pre-eminently the mother, who was most susceptible to her in that manifestation. And — as Anne-Marie wheeled her charge away — he was still further disconcerted by a tacit appeal from Gabrielle herself.

"You wouldn't believe the joy that stray atom is to me," she said in a tone that presupposed his sympathy.

"I can believe it," he answered truthfully. "Children are — wonderful things —" Then he spurred his waning courage and went straight to the point. "How long — do you think of keeping him — this way — as if he was your own? It's ten to one against Mums ever tracing his parents."

"Yes — we realize that. It's just to satisfy one's conscience — But I'm beginning to believe Fate means to let me keep my little morsel of *la belle France* — and rear him to be worthy of her in her agony — 'broke to every known mischance, lifted over all' — France, as she is to-day."

The thrill in her low tone and the soft shining of her wonderful eyes made the hapless Derek shrink more than ever from the clumsy intrusion of things pedestrian. And Gabrielle, arrested

by his lack of response, turned to him with a humorous lift of her brows.

"But — it is all so un-English! You are thinking me a sentimental fool?"

At that Derek blinked a little as if a strong light had been flashed in his eyes.

"I would never connect either of those words — with you," he said slowly. "It's a woman's affair. Not for a man to meddle and muddle with. But —"

"*But* —?" she challenged him smiling; "I felt that 'but' in the air! Believe me, I realize it's not quite so simple as it seems. I can see — other sides to it; and — honestly, I have wanted to know what you — your opinion —"

Her delicate flattery warmed his heart. "I warn you," he said, "it won't square with your wishes. Do you still want it?"

"Of course — more than ever. You have judgment. And it's such a rare quality: a steady light shining through the fog of our confused thoughts and feelings. Mine are extra confused just now. So please don't hide your light under a bushel! You believe — to adopt *Le Petit* — would be a mistake?"

"A grave mistake."

"In what way? For whom?"

"For yourself — certainly. For the child, as likely as not."

He moved on, in speaking, and she moved with him. He had a seat in mind at a turning down into the wood. Having started, he must pull it through somehow: and an interruption would extinguish him altogether.

"In the first place," he went on, after a pause, "you have pretty clear proof that he is not of your own class?"

She nodded. "Most likely of the bourgeoisie — the backbone of France."

"True — *in* France, reared in their own element. All plants won't thrive in all soils. Besides — there is the personal consideration. And you overlook it at your peril. Your feeling for the child, now, is the natural, beautiful mother tenderness for anything young and weak. When he is no longer a baby, that might change. You would find, perhaps, you had made

him love you and had little or nothing to give him in return. It would be truer kindness — don't you think? — not to waken a craving you could never really satisfy?"

She sighed. "Your light penetrates to the roots of things."

"That relation lies at the roots of things," he said quietly. "To some men it is the most vital of all. And your *Petit* will grow into a Frenchman — remember. Besides, there are other considerations — the possible . . . misjudgment of . . . your own world."

"No one misjudges me *here* — except . . . perhaps . . . your brother —"

A slow blush crept into her cheek; and Derek thought: "I wasn't mistaken. She cares." The conviction gave him courage to take the cue she had unwittingly given him.

"You're wrong there — I am sure of it. But — doesn't his feeling about things — count for something?"

She compressed her lips. "I don't really know what his feeling amounts to. A good deal of it, I suspect, is simply an echo of the world's view: therefore unworthy of serious consideration."

"Rather a sweeping conclusion. The world has to be reckoned with; and it often has a common-sensible way of hitting the nail on the head."

"*That* — from you?" She flashed round on him; and sheer surprise blinded him to the implied compliment.

"From me, it is more worth considering than — say — from Van?"

"Of course. From you it is a phenomenon!"

This time his pleasure was evident. "Certainly I've been up against the world's view ever since I was old enough to recognize it."

"And now — you are converted?" She questioned with sceptical eyebrows. "You think you made a mistake?"

"I have made more mistakes, of all sorts," he answered gravely, "than I care to reckon up. Not always — of my own free will."

As he happened to be studying the gravel path, he failed to see the quickened interest in her eyes. "Does he recognize," she thought, "the biggest one of all?"

But she dared not approach that subject. So she said nothing, and he went on: "The trouble with me is — I've an incurable habit of putting my finger into other people's pies!"

"Of helping them, in fact! There was a sailor boy once, in a train."

"You remember that?"

"But of course. It was our first meeting. And it made a deep impression. I believe it prompted my burst of confidence."

Derek smiled thoughtfully at the recollection, and took a pull at his pipe. "That affair was rudimentary. A mere matter of cash. The complications begin when you rashly thrust a finger into some one else's life. And I've been wondering if you quite realize that, in such cases, one often does more harm than good, with the best intentions in the world. I'm speaking," he added gravely, "from bitter personal experience. Lois —"

A catch in his throat checked him; and her heart gave a sudden leap. "You mean —?"

"I mean — she — the whole thing — was a tragic case in point."

That astonishing confession sent a thrill through her. But — it did not suffice. Now that he had broken the silence, she must know more.

"I don't — quite understand," she said in a low tone. "I never did understand."

"I knew that." His voice was quiet as her own. It was as if they had passed into a church. "Jack didn't either. It was part of what — one had to accept."

"Had to?" she queried, lower still.

New light was dawning on her, startlingly illuminating the secret places of her heart. She could feel that something was impelling him to unlock his closed doors; and she feared to arrest that impulse by a word or a look too much.

"Yes — had to," he repeated. They had reached the seat now, and he was thankful. He had physical need of it.

"Shall we sit?" he said. "I would like — to try and tell you. It might help you — to see what I mean."

They sat; and he so established himself, in the corner of the bench, that her profile came in his direct line of vision. It did not precisely make things easier; but the temptation mastered him. "Fate — my arch enemy," he went on, "and . . . the troublesome propensity I spoke of, pretty well threw that poor child into my arms. She was ill — frightened — in desperate straits —"

A long pause. Then — in words the more impressive because they were few and direct — he told her all. There were details that he had instinctively kept back from his father. From her he kept back nothing. He knew she had loved Lois and would be gentle in her judgment. Also his sure instinct told him that his confidence, at this moment, would add a weight to his advice which no mere argument could do.

And Gabrielle, looking out over the pine tops, while he — the silent one — talked and talked, saw, with enlightened eyes, the whole pitiful tragedy: saw, too, with a stab of pain, how utterly she had misjudged him — she, who prided herself on being something of a psychologist. She had seen him simply succumbing to a pretty face, or the mere need of a wife: and all the while he had been in the toils; doing everything he could — with a man's pathetic ignorance — for that unhappy child, whose adoration of him she vividly remembered. That little scene in the veranda was clear as day to her now. So were a good many other things —

And through it all she scarcely spoke. She knew her silence would not be misunderstood. Only once he directly appealed to her. "It was a distracting — a cruel position — for both of us. But — what else could a man do? She was so helpless — so lost and strayed."

"Oh, how *well* I understand," murmured Gabrielle. "And was that chiefly — why —?"

"Altogether why. It seemed to me I could ease things for her, save her, perhaps, from some desperate folly. But there you are — the facts, the unseen boundaries of life have the last

word, in spite of us. I did all a fool man could think of. But — I couldn't give her the one thing she wanted. So — I couldn't make her happy, which — in my arrogance, I set out to do. When the War came, she saw how it was tugging at me. And because I wouldn't leave her, she bolted on impulse — left me — ”

Gabrielle drew a sharp breath. “Altogether?”

“No. She went to Victoria. She had faith in you. Never forgot your kindness — any more than I did. But — you were gone — ”

“Oh, poor lamb! And she had to come back?”

“I had to fetch her. She was terribly ill. In fact — it killed her — that and — the child.”

Gabrielle could not speak. Her eyes were full of tears.

Derek's pipe had gone out. He pocketed it; cleared his throat and said quietly: “You see — the connection?”

She started. She had seen no connection. She had only seen the true Derek, unveiling his own soul with a beautiful unconscious simplicity, while he supposed he was ‘clearing the course’ for Van.

“You mustn't miss the point!” he urged with a twinkle of humour. “You see — I went outside my class — ignored the limits, as my father would say. She was grateful and devoted; but — we were on different planes. With the best will in the world, we could never meet. It would be much the same, in another way, if you reared that infant as your own. The chances are, all the affection would be one-sided — the position anomalous; and — when it came to marrying — ”

“Yes — I see,” she said, more to herself than to him: and Derek, with his eyes on her face, would have given several years of his life to know exactly what was passing in her mind.

“I want you to do more than see,” he persisted gently. “I have told you things I never thought to tell any one, because an ounce of life is worth a ton of theory. And — because you are Jacko's sister. In fact . . .” he concluded with his whimsical smile — “I'm doing it again!”

“Doing what?”

"Interfering, clumsily enough — with the best of motives; though I ought to know, by now, that it's pretty well useless."

"It shan't be useless — on this occasion."

The fervour in her low tone surprised him. "Thank you," he said; and his eyes met hers full for the first time since he had begun to speak of intimate things.

"Thank you, for making me see — for opening my eyes —" She checked herself and drew in her lips. "You mean —?"

"I mean — quit the idea of a personal link. You can play Providence to your *Petit* just as well without it. Let his foster mother be French. Why not Mums' pet refugee, Mme. Lemerne. She lost both her children in that first awful flight. Be responsible, if you will, for the costs, his education, and so on. But that little woman would probably give him the best possible substitute for a mother's love —"

"And I — can be his *marraine*? But what a happy idea! How splendidly you have thought it all out."

"I didn't think. It only just occurred to me."

"Oh, you are so delightfully British," she murmured, a very soft light in her eyes. "Advertising your failures and trying to camouflage your achievements!" She hesitated. An uncomfortable doubt invaded her mind.

"All this *is* — your own honest opinion? You are not speaking with — some one else at the back of your mind?"

"I have spoken my honest opinion. But I won't deny there *is* some one else at the back of my mind," said truthful Derek in a level tone; for the words were hard to bring out. "It's natural — isn't it? I know him so well. I know the kind of things that grate on him: — in this case, surely — not without reason. Hasn't he — some shadow of right —?"

"None — that I have given him," she answered, her colour rising, her beautiful frankness of look and tone clean gone.

"Perhaps — he hopes," Derek ventured, determined to say all, while the chance was his. "Anyhow — he is coming on Friday. He says — petrol restrictions, and — other things have been keeping him in town —"

"He shall not find my *piou-piou* on the terrace," she said

with her small, baffling smile. "It would be more than unkind to upset him so again. As for your honest opinion . . . I promise to consider it seriously . . . because it is yours."

And with that enigmatic assurance he had to rest content. He could see that his news perturbed her; but whether that fact augured well for Van, events alone could prove. His half-hour was nearly up; and he became aware of a sharp physical reaction, that warned him he was still very far from being himself again.

On their way back to the house he limped badly; and she remarked on it, with concern.

"You walked splendidly along the terrace — just now."

"I can do it in spurts," he said. "Can't keep it up."

"Never mind — some day!" she consoled him with the mother note in her voice.

He sighed and smiled. The future did not look very alluring at that moment — even if it brought sound lungs and the capacity to walk twenty miles again. . . .

That afternoon he wrote to Van. "I have spoken myself to Miss de Vigne. She sees the mistake of the adoption idea. I don't think she will have the child up here quite so much. But I couldn't press that point. Hope you manage Friday, and — good luck to you!"

Nothing further could he bring himself to say. That Van would get what he wanted was, to him, inevitable as any law of Nature; and for himself — reaction had been more than physical. Unauthorized sensations could no longer be ignored: and his full awakening — as with all strong, controlled natures — was passionate, overwhelming. He, who was so diffident and so critical as to fancy himself incapable, almost, of the 'one illogical adventure,' was now to discover that it is just the almost incapable who sink deepest, or soar highest when their great moment comes. It seemed quite in keeping with the persistent irony of things, that his own great moment should not lift him up, but cast him down; should condemn him, as he believed, to the barren life of singleness, which —

in face of this new and commanding emotion — looked less inviting than he would have believed possible a year ago.

He knew now that this wonderful thing had lain in his heart for weeks, unrecognized; partly because, from the first, he had connected her with Van; partly because he was still shy of any emotion that involved the acute accentuation of the self. But would he, or no, nothing could save him now from an accentuation so acute that — having cleared the course for Van — he was confounded by a sudden primitive uprush of jealousy; a fierce conviction that he, Derek, had a deeper wealth of love for her in his little finger than Van could have in his whole body. And the chances he had missed, in Oxford days, through mere shyness and lack of address —! The chances he had missed at Victoria — because of poor Lois! Was it written in the book of Fate that his life should be one interminable tale of chances missed? If so it was a thousand pities he had also missed his chance of being gassed to death at Loos!

The raking up of his past threw into strong relief the contrast between his own travesty of a marriage and the sort of thing that was in store for Van, who — in spite of passing qualms — would simply accept it as his right. Certainly his answering note was scarcely that of a lover very much alive to his own unworthiness.

PRICELESS OLD BEAN,—

So you've done it off your own bat. Played indeed! You deserve a D.C.M. Anyhow, I make you free of my humble and heartfelt thanks — and all the rest of it. Friday it is, if I can possibly work it. Put up a plea that the weather and the Goddess may prove kind — and your petitioner will ever pray.

Honestly, Dirks, I am

Your very grateful brother

V. B.

CHAPTER X

A bird of the air shall carry it; and that which hath wings shall tell the matter.
SOLOMON

Two days later came the Indian mail with its unfailing blue envelope addressed in his father's scholarly hand. It felt thicker than usual; and Derek, pocketing his treasure, went down into the wood, where a freshly felled tree offered a congenial seat and brought a whiff of the Selkirks to his nostrils.

There he opened his envelope and discovered that its thickness was due to an enclosure — a typed copy of a letter from Sir Vyvian Blount, and of a paragraph from a popular paper noted for its anti-German zeal. With a sick feeling of fore-knowledge, Derek scanned its contents.

My readers will hardly be surprised to learn that Dame Rumour has again been buzzing round a certain historic place in Hampshire, which, it seems, has become a lively centre of camouflaged enemy-alien activity. But reports from that quarter have a mysterious way of slipping into official pigeon holes — and sticking there! The police are growing angry and suspicious. But who, except the bamboozled public, cares a curse for the police? Unluckily the 'noble lord' is doing good work elsewhere; and his clever son seems to be afflicted with the gentlemanly departmental cast of mind, that would not for the world suspect a naturalized German brother, even if it caught the fraternal hand emerging from its own pocket! He appears to be intimate with that impeccable patriot Mr. S . . . g, who, it is whispered, organized and financed his fine Auxiliary Hospital. It is certainly an unfortunate fact that the hospital staff are not all of them Britons under their skins.' Most of the masseuses are Swedes. Neutral, of course! We know all about those neutrals! And suspicion attaches to a neighbouring house (ideally placed for signalling) inhabited by an innocuous, elderly gentleman and two alien domestics, who have been in charge since 1913. There are persistent reports of

concealed wireless; but the house seems to be securely sheltered from Home Office alarms. All the same I venture to predict we shall hear more of this trio, though possibly not of the hidden hand behind it all. Reports may come and reports may go, but the great Unimpeachable, with his exalted friends, is safe to go on for ever!

At the end of the second reading, Derek's northern anger blazed up. The blood drummed in his temples. The flimsy paper shook a little in his hand. To him — with his deep personal love and pride — it was almost as if his mother's honour had been bespattered with mud. And Van was more than half responsible for it all — Van, who aspired to win Gabrielle de Vigne —!

He almost shrank, now, from unfolding the letter he had opened so eagerly a few minutes ago; and the thought flashed through his mind: "Good Heavens! I don't envy Van, when he opens his!"

MY DEAREST BOY [Lord Avonleigh wrote], —

Read the enclosed. They speak for themselves. If Uncle Vyvian's letter were not written by my own brother, and with evident reluctance, I would not credit a word of it. I leave you to imagine the shock it has been to us. By your own feelings you can judge of mine, which are better, perhaps, left unexpressed. I recognize that Mother and I must accept our share of the blame. Our son is — what we have made him.

As to yourself, I am anxious to know how much of this you have guessed or suspected all along; since it was evidently things you said — and left unsaid — that made Uncle Vyvian try and get at the truth. Of course, my dear boy, I respect the motive that kept you silent. And Malcolm must have had his suspicions. I owe him an apology. A detestable position. It was naturally easier for Uncle Vyvian to write than for either of you: and I am thankful he has had the courage to deal me the hardest blow of my life. As for Schonberg, I only wish I could come straight home and speak my mind in person. I fear I should deal some shrewd blows. He is playing a low-down double game, like a good many others of his unscrupulous race. But from what I know of the inner circle, I fear it would be waste of time and energy trying to show him up. One would never catch him on the nail. Even as I write, comes a cable from Uncle Vyvian to say

Burnt Hill House has been cleared — and at *his* instigation. There you are. I bitterly regret now that I ever acceded to Burlton's importunity. If I live to come home, that house shall be destroyed. I am scribbling this in bed. The shock has thoroughly upset me. Write to me fully, Derek, now there is no more need for keeping things back. You have the real stuff of manhood in you. You were not afraid of soiling your boy's dream with the mud of actual life. And your courage has made you whole. I wish to God you had been my firstborn.

Your loving father

AVONLEIGH

Scarcely a direct mention of Van. So like him! Yet the hurt to his fatherhood, his pride and trust, stood revealed through that same studious avoidance and in the final cry from the heart, which distressed and uplifted Derek in about equal degrees—so confused and intricate are the boundary lines between pleasure and pain. But some one might come along any moment; and there still remained Uncle Vyvian's letter — by far the longer of the two.

Soldier-like, it went straight to the point.

DEAR AVONLEIGH,—

This letter is going to be a nasty job for both of us. I would rather depute my share of it to any one else on earth. But things are happening here that you ought to know of, and I am the only person among those concerned, who can venture to write you unpleasant truths about your own son. Naturally I have hesitated — too long, perhaps. Facts were not easy to get at. But after reading enclosed paragraph, I can hesitate no longer. I may say I chiefly have to thank Derek for giving me a notion that something was up in that quarter. Not that he ever cast aspersions on his brother. He has been perfectly loyal and straightforward in the matter. But I saw he was worried and drew my own conclusions.

Followed a plain tale of Avonleigh affairs — circumstantial, critical, dispassionate; — the outcome of cautious and thorough investigation. General Blount, in younger days, had done good work for the Intelligence Department.

It established the fact that Schonberg had originated the hospital plan; that he was a good deal more intimate with Van

than their surface intercourse would lead one to suppose. Circumstantial reports of a wireless installation on Burnt Hill had decided the General to take definite action in the matter. ("That accounts," thought Derek with a sick feeling of disgust, "they got wind of it.") He indulged in no vague accusations, no unproven statements, which made his damning evidence the more impressive.

But I feel bound to add [he concluded], in common fairness to Van, that I imply no disloyalty on his part; simply inborn laziness — mental and moral; possible financial accommodations and an amazing lack of perception — the devil's staunchest ally. If he ever had qualms he probably treated them with a liver pill! Forgive my plain speaking. How far you will be able to forgive the cause of it, I find it a hard matter to guess.

Derek also found it a 'stiff proposition'; and he did not envy Van the prospect of confronting his father face to face. By the inflexible streak in himself, he knew that Lord Avonleigh's anger would be of the cold intellectual order that neither explodes nor evaporates. A year hence he would probably be no nearer forgiveness than at the present moment. And Derek understood —

Though he could think of it all, by now, with a cooler brain, he could not bring himself to write. The first word must come from Van. Would he — could he — have the face to come down to-morrow and press his suit with Miss de Vigne —?

At that point he became aware of a woman's figure leaning over the terrace balustrade; he looked up quickly; his heart knocking unevenly against his ribs. It was Honor Lenox; and his sharp revulsion of feeling was tinged with relief.

"This won't *do*," he thought sternly, as Honor called out: "*There* you are, Derek! We'd lost you. Time for massage."

His hip and back were still treated with electricity; and as a rule he found it both soothing and stimulating. But this new imperious emotion startlingly intensified his whole gamut of sensation; and to-day he was further unstrung by the shock of

his father's letter; the pain of his smouldering wrath with Van. To-day the pressure of those tingling needles simply maddened him. Their soft, relentless probing set his nerves on edge. Only by setting his teeth could he endure it without shrinking. Once he came near seizing the detested thing and thrusting it from him —

Very soon Honor's practised eye discerned that something was wrong. She switched off the battery; and he let out an irrepressible sigh of relief.

"Is it upsetting you? What's the matter, Derek?"

"I don't know," he said gruffly. "I don't seem able to stand it this morning. Go on — if you must. Never mind me!"

She regarded him anxiously. "No use going on — if you feel like that. Just lie quiet."

"Thanks very much." She put away the hateful thing, drew the coverlet over him and went quietly out, leaving him alone in the sun-filled ward. He felt an ungracious beast, letting her go without a word.

Five minutes later, Sheila came in and stood by his bed, a wrinkle of distress between her brows. He thought how charming she looked like that; and the promise of motherhood seemed to have lit a new light in her eyes. All the same he wished to goodness they would leave him alone.

"Derek, dear — are you feeling ill?" she asked. "Honor seemed worried."

He never could resist Sheila; and the fact that he had made a fool of himself had to be accounted for somehow.

"I'm not ill," he said, frowning because speech was difficult. "But I've had a bit of an upset. Sorry I can't be more explicit. I suppose it reacted on my rotten nerves. All I want is — to get away alone and have a go at something. Haven't you any errands in Wynchmere — if Mark would trust me with his little car? Promise I won't bring back the pieces in my pocket!" Behind his awkward manner and attempt at humour, she divined his very real pain.

"Couldn't you talk it out with Mark?" she asked.

He shook his head.

"Very well. You shall talk it out with the car! I'll provide the errands, and I'm sure Gay will subscribe —"

"Don't give me away," he said quickly.

"Of course not." Then because her sympathy could not be spoken, she laid a soothing hand on his shoulder a moment — and was gone.

The blessed relief it was to get clean away from them all — the little car purring under him like a live thing; the blue unheeding skies above him; the breeze in his face; the sun's caress on his bare head. In times of stress, he had turned instinctively to Earth, as to a mother — the only real mother he had known. The car, as Mark said, almost drove herself; and once his errands were over, Derek gave 'the little beauty' her head.

Up and down and along endless stretches of sunlit road he raced, in flat defiance of the law; dashing through deep-hearted lanes, as through a tunnel, and out again across sweeps of open moor — brown and green and rose-madder, with splashes of purple where the bell heather was in bloom. Clouds gathered in the west, extinguished the sun, and emptied themselves in a refreshing shower that seemed to cool a little the fire in his blood. Nothing for it, then, but to head for home.

He arrived, drenched to the skin, was convicted of a temperature and condemned to bed. And his fellow patients, in their kindly ignorance, came and ministered unto him.

CHAPTER XI

Truth rejected returns as pain.

ROBERT NICHOLLS, R.F.A.

MEANTIME, up in London, Van was suffering also, after his kind.

In the first place, these three weeks of self-imposed absence, designed to bring Gabrielle to her senses, had brought him metaphorically to her feet. He knew, now, that he was genuinely in love with her; that his antagonism to that intrusive infant sprang from sheer jealousy — the possessive passion that no woman had hitherto stirred in his lukewarm soul. A man given to self-deception can seldom discern the true springs of action either in himself or others. For the light within him is darkness. But this much at least he had discovered by the uncomfortable intensity of his sensations, that irresistibly she drew him — held him; while he — fool that he was — had insanely taken it for granted that absence would quicken her need of him.

And when Van could accuse himself of folly he was far gone indeed.

On Friday morning, when Francis came in to draw the curtains, he decided — it *must* be to-day. Another twenty-four hours of uncertainty was more than a fellow could stand —

Two hours later, he sat in the most comfortable chair of his supremely comfortable drawing-room, staring straight before him — Lord Avonleigh's open letter in his hand.

What the hell did it mean and who the devil had put Uncle Vyvian on the Schonberg track? What skunk was responsible for the details of that para —? The mere touch of it seemed to smirch his gentlemanly fingers, that had curiously never recoiled from the touch of Schonberg's money. Last and worst, what the hell was going to come of it all —?

Reluctantly, for the second time, he read his father's letter. Its curt, restrained phrases cut like flicks of a whip.

DEAR VAN,—

I hardly know how to write to you. If you will glance through the enclosed, you may, perhaps, understand my difficulty. I have always recognized, with regret, that a sense of responsibility was not the most robust of your qualities. And I confess I had qualms on leaving England. But, at least, I believed that the honour of our house and name would be safe in your hands. It is not pleasant to find that I made the greatest mistake of my life. Your letters, that seemed so frank, stand revealed as masterpieces of mis-statement. I congratulate you. It seems you are a good deal cleverer — and less squeamish — than I supposed. It is bitter to realize how one's eyes may be blinded by affection and pride.

I am writing to Schonberg this mail. So far, I have left you perfectly free. Now I must take matters into my own hands, though God knows I have enough to tackle out here. To begin with, kindly send me a full list of the hospital staff and exert yourself to discover their true names and nationality. When you have read all, I hope you may have the grace to be ashamed of yourself — if only because you have broken the eleventh Commandment. Where much is given, much is required — and good measure pressed down has been given to you ever since you were born —

Van set his teeth, and the muscles of his throat worked painfully. Into a single sheet his father had compressed the full force of his anger, his pain and bitterness of soul. He could not bring himself to read it all again. With unsteady fingers, he struck a match and held the paper in the flame till it was reduced to ashes. The cutting and General Blount's disconcerting array of facts shared the same fate. Even in the midst of his genuine distress the instinct to safeguard himself prevailed.

Then, with curses in his heart, he lit a cigarette and continued to sit there, feeling utterly confounded.

He was of those who live spiritually from hand to mouth and find themselves without anchorage in the day of trouble. Anger, alarm, curiosity, in turn tormented him; and beneath the sur-

face confusion lurked a deadly fear of Schonberg, whose relentless fingers held all the strings —

What, precisely, had his father said to that most formidable of men? Judging from his own sample, he had been in no temper to mince his words. Yet he did not see him giving away his own son — whatever his shortcomings. And again — what line would Schonberg take, if seriously angered? In no direction could he see an inch ahead — he who had been wont to move securely through a world of agreeable shams and skilfully stage-managed facts. He felt stunned in the clutch of unyielding reality; powerless as a corn of wheat between two grindstones . . .

Goaded by sheer agitation, he rose and paced the room — fresh images, fresh perplexities mocking him at every stride. Sharply it came home to him that his father's undemonstrative love and confidence were possessions that he could not bear to lose. And what of his mother, if this horrid situation got completely out of hand? Unthinkable that she should ever see him stripped of the halo he had been at such pains to keep bright.

More than once he cursed Uncle Vyvian for an officious meddler; and again fell to wondering irritably who had given him away? (Lord Avonleigh, for reasons of his own, had omitted any allusion to Derek.) Had Karl or Dirks been stupidly indiscreet? He could not, even in desperation, suspect either of deliberately letting him down. Indeed, he could scarcely think coherently at all. He felt trapped — paralyzed; wondered who would make the first move; knew himself — with acute annoyance — incapable of making it —

Dared he even go down to Wynchcombe Friars? Would Derek know? Would Gabrielle know? More than ever, now, he had urgent need to stand high in her esteem . . .

A sudden, blessed impulse seized him. Here was a way to defer his evil hour. He would go down at once and secure her before worse befell. The fact of a sound marriage in prospect — with a connection of Burltons to boot — might just possibly be of use if Schonberg were inclined to cut up rough. At least

it was encouraging to hope so. Acutely he realized how infinitesimal was his knowledge of the man.

The sooner he got away the better —

There was sheer relief in the simple act of ringing for Francis, of issuing orders for the car to be summoned, the portmanteau packed.

But he was hardly gone before the imperative voice of the telephone jerked him back to uncertainty. Schonberg — or his mother —?

While he stood irresolute, the summons was repeated; and his tentative "Hulloa!" was answered in Schonberg's guttural tones.

"That you, Blount? Schonberg speaking —" Those few words sufficed. There would be trouble. "I haf a most disagreeable letter from Lord Afonleigh. I must see you at once. I shall gome in half an hour."

Van — after expressing polite concern — found courage to protest that he was obliged to go out of town for the week-end —

An odd chuckle interrupted him. Nothing genial in the sound of it. "There are *some* matters of greater concern than weeg-ends. I must ask you to favour me by changing your plans. You haf heard yourself?"

"Yes."

"And you are ang-shus to defer the pleasure? It is not my habit to defer pleasures — or pains. *Zo!*"

Before Van could answer, he found himself rung off; forced ignominiously to countermand his urgent orders, and to face at leisure the worst half-hour of his life.

He had scarcely faced ten minutes of it — with the inadequate assistance of the *Telegraph* — when that vexatious bell startled him afresh.

He cursed the confounded thing — and went on with his article.

"Ting-ting-ting!" it repeated; and the sharp sound seemed to stab his brain. Probably some tradesman. Why didn't Francis attend to the fellow? He wanted to read about "Invincible Russia." Things might fluctuate a bit; but one's investments were safe in *that* quarter —

When the door-handle turned, he started visibly. It was only Francis — who saw and heard nothing but what he was paid to see and hear.

"Lady Avonleigh on the 'phone, please, sir," he announced.
"She wants to speak to you — very particular."

Genuine remorse brought Van to his feet. Goodness knew what they had written to the poor dear; and he had kept her waiting. Unardonable! Brushing past his decorously intrigued manservant, he hurried into the adjoining room.

"That you, Mother?" he asked superfluously; and a small gasp assured him that it was so.

"I thought you were never coming," she lamented, without a hint of reproach.

"I'm awfully sorry, dear —"

He paused, uncertainly; and she began again.

"Van — I'm *so* worried. I've had the most extraordinary letter from Aunt Marion. Not a line from Father — Have *you* heard? Do come round at once."

"Wish to Heaven I could," Van answered honestly enough.
"I'm tied up with an urgent business appointment — Schonberg."

"Oh, darling — *do* be careful," her voice was almost inaudible.
"He doesn't seem to be — quite —"

"Confound Aunt Marion!" thought Van. Aloud he said hurriedly: "Don't get in a state, dear. I'll come to lunch — and we'll talk it out. I've heard from Father. Just go ahead with your usual affairs. I'll be punctual."

"Darling — *what* a comfort you are!" she breathed; and Van returned to his paper, feeling soothed by her implicit faith in him.

Come what might, *her* trust, her love must not be shaken. She would never survive the shock of disillusion; and his concern for her was as genuine — almost — as for himself. In all his days he had never heard a note of disapproval in her voice or seen the light of criticism in her eyes. "Wonderful things — mothers," he reflected, and felt distinctly grateful to Nature for her crowning achievement.

But there still remained the staggering consideration — what the devil was he going to say to Schonberg? Impossible even to frame a sentence, since he had not a glimmering idea what Schonberg would say to him —!

Punctually at the half-hour he was ushered in by Francis with an air of italicized respect that tinged the valet's whole attitude to this particular guest.

"Goot morning, Mr. Blount," he said, as the door closed. For Van those four words and the unfamiliar prefix to his own name spelt war.

"Good morning — Schonberg," he replied with a valiant attempt at lightness. "Have I been tried — and condemned unheard — what?"

Schonberg regarded him a moment, with that strange half-threatening lift of his lids.

"*Ach*, my friendt, your eeg-winimity is not easily shaken. But to-day I haf no taste for leetle chokes. I haf received from Lord Afonleigh a letter that, in plain words, I taig as an insult, gonsidering how I haf spared no trouble in this business and haf also done a goot many services of friendship, for his son. But of that, it is pozible, he is ignorant — *hein?*"

With a flourish he produced the offending letter. "I shall ask you to read that and tell me what ag-shun you propose to take in the matter?"

Van — whose equanimity was not proof against the attack direct — took the thing without a word. A big pulse was beating in his throat as he unfolded the sheet and read:

DEAR MR. SCHONBERG,—

Unpleasant things are best said in fewest words. So I will be brief and straightforward. I have known, of course, from my son that you were among those who first subscribed to start the Avonleigh Auxiliary Hospital, and that you have since continued to take an interest in it. But, being up to my eyes in work out here, I left things almost entirely in his hands; and only lately I have had leisure to go into details. I am more than surprised to find that the lion's share of the cost appears to have been borne by you. Very generous on your part; but, frankly, I do not choose to be so heavily beholden to any man, least of all to one who bears an enemy name, naturalized

or no. I make no personal implications. I merely assert that a man's link with his own country is too vital to be affected by any superficial shifting of sympathy or interests. It is a point on which I feel very strongly. My son and I have never thought alike in this matter; and, in his zeal to do the thing well, he has gone farther than I approve in the direction of accepting outside contributions. I shall be much obliged, therefore, if you will let me know precisely what your outlay has been, in addition to the first contribution, and it shall be refunded. The whole thing will shortly have to be run on a more modest scale, as ill-health may entail my leaving India; and I could then only spare part of the house. In the circumstances, you will probaby wish to retire from the Committee — and I confess I should prefer it.

With all due acknowledgment of your assistance to my son,

I am, yours, etc.,

AVONLEIGH

Van's mouth had gone dry as he read his father's clever, yet frankly inimical letter. He could feel Schonberg's eyes on his face; and he had not the courage to look up and meet them.

The German, probably aware of that inability, grew impatient.

"*Zo!* It is not written in Greeg nor Shinese," he broke out; and the roughness in his tone was new to Van. "It is — in plain English — Hands off my affair! His noble lordship forgets. Afonleigh may be his; but the affair is mine. Again, it is pozible he does not know — *hein?*"

Van moistened his lips. "Sit down, won't you? It's as cheap as standing," he said politely. As long as possible he would keep the talk on a light note.

Schonberg came down heavily upon the nearest chair; and Van was thankful to follow suit. He thought: "I may be in a blue funk, but he shan't come the Prussian over me."

"*Zo?*"

Again that maddening monosyllable was shot at him, like a discharge of cannon.

"Well — you see for yourself what my father says. He is full up with work; so — one did not worry him with details. Besides — he has his cranks . . . his prejudices. And — per-

sonally, while I was in charge of things, I considered myself free to follow my own inclinations . . . ”

“Only — you did *not* consider it necessary to say so? Aha!” A more genial light gleamed in Schonberg’s unwavering eye. “To say just so mush — but not all; that is the grade art, my friendt. But — there is need of skill. There is also need of courage. The bold strogue at the zygodological moment — which has now arrived. Your father has prejudices — yes. He will not be beholden — no. Begoz I am a Cherman. With you it is otherwise — as I haf practical proof. And I haf been a goot friendt to you, Blount. It is now for you to play up and speak for me to your noble father. How can I help it — if I *am* a Cherman? Let a man be judged by his actions — not so?”

“Of course, of course, my dear fellow. And you, being an active verb, can give me points on that score!” He was silent, weighing each desperate alternative. It seemed he stood to be worsted either way; but his chief concern, at the moment, was to keep Schonberg in his more friendly vein. “Heaven knows I’m willing to do what I can for you. But you can’t hold me responsible for my father’s taste in nationalities. Nothing I could say would change his opinion, in that matter or any other. You can’t be more annoyed over it all than I am; but I give you my word, old chap — it isn’t any earthly —”

A sceptical glimmer in Schonberg’s eyes checked his plausible flow of speech; and the large head nodded several times like an automaton.

“No more need of flummery. You haf to choose between your father and me. To run with the hare and the hounds is not so easy as it looks, my friendt. You haf some skill, but you haf just not suffeicient moral courage for the game you would so mush like to play. Your father is a strong man — a hard man. Not the kind to wink at your so many picadillies. Women — perhaps. Money, and other sush leetle matters — no. And he is too mush the great chentleman to gif you away. He had no leisure — zo! You think I gannot read between the lines? It is another who has done him the

favour to tell him some trifling facts you disgreely overlooked — not so?"

Van shrugged. "There are always plenty of people ready to do one that kind of disservice."

Increasing fear and distrust of the man warned him to be cautious. But Schonberg had an uncomfortable trick of seeming to read the writing on a man's brain.

"Zo! You do not wish to say? Very well. I am here for pragtical business. Your father thinks to refund my outlay is all the need. *Quatch!* He is English. He does not understand Schonberg. I haf put into this business more than money. But, my Gott! He would open his eyes quicker than his purse, if I should taig him at his word and present my leetle aggount. Better for you, Blount, and for Afonleigh, if you shall insist that the full disgretion he gave you must hold till his return; that you cannot go back on a friendt who has done goot service to the gountry and to yourself. It is liguely you prefer he should not know that — *hein?*"

Van bit his lip and stared hard at his flowering plants, as if the right answer to that awkward question lay hidden in their depths. More and more he felt like a corn of wheat between the upper and nether millstone. It was a position without precedent; and since he lived mainly by precedent, by the code of the right thing, he was correspondingly at a loss. If neither his father nor Schonberg would budge an inch —?

"Are you so dead keen on Avonleigh?" he temporized. "You have no end of bigger concerns. I should have thought —"

Schonberg dismissed his thought with a large, outspread hand; and Van mechanically noticed that its nails were not so clean as they might be. "No more time for beating the bush. Your father is too strong. You haf not courage to stand up against him."

Sheer nervousness goaded Van into impatience. "I'll trouble you not to fling cowardice in my teeth. One might as well try and shift Avonleigh Hall to suit one's convenience. You don't know my father, Schonberg."

"Not so? But I haf the pleasure and prifilege to know his son." A lurking significance in his tone sent a trickle of apprehension down Van's spine. "I maig it my business to know my friendts — alzo my enemies."

"Why talk of enemies?" Van parried desperately.

"Begoz your father is treating me as such — and you are not so mush my friend as to venture one small protest. Haf I asked you any favours, egsept this one? If I was not keen for this Hospital business would I taig so much trouble? I do not want the bother to start all afresh. But this one thing I ask of you; and — you won't do it."

"Damn it all, I tell you it's a case of 'Can't.'"

Schonberg's smile scarcely veiled a sneer. "Who wills— can. By that belief I haf leaped over every wall. I was not born, like yourself, in a padded armchair. And I can tell you, Blount, I am better to haf for a friend than an enemy. You will not do what I ask. *Zo!* Yet you were ready enough I should foot the egspense; and my leetle aggount — I haf warned you — will startle Lord Afonleigh. Especially if I shall add a few extra trifles that you haf not found it convenient to repay —"

Van flinched and changed colour, but he said nothing; and Schonberg went suavely on: "Mutual aggommodation between friendts — that is sound policy. If no longer mutual — then I claim what is my own. Nashurally — *if* you can pay me back —"

His hands were expressively flung out; and Van — who was not given to restlessness — rose abruptly. For the second time that morning, he paced his carpet in unfeigned distraction of mind. His father's anger was a terrible thing; but once let Schonberg suspect that he went in fear of it —! This genial fellow, of whom once he could believe no harm, seemed distorted suddenly into a semi-scoundrel capable of the worst —

At last he came to a standstill, furrows of perplexity on his smooth forehead.

"Of course — I can pay back part. In fact — all — I hope

— if you give me time. The whole thing is so unexpected — so detestable. I imagined I was dealing with a gentleman —”

The arrow glanced harmlessly aside.

“We shall never be chentlemen, and you will always be fools!” Schonberg paraphrased his own countrymen; and his sneer was no longer veiled. “This mush I can tell you, Blount, you are dealing with a man who knows his own mind and is aggustomed to get his own way. Either you shall write to your father or — I write myself — whatever I think fit —”

“In fact — you threaten me!” Van retorted, a spark of defiance in his grey eyes. “Then, by God, you *shall* write and tell him what you damn well please. My father, even in anger, is a just man. I would sooner be in *his* hands —”

“*A-ach!* Now we know precisely where we stand.” The change of tone was startling; and Van — for all his brave words — wished to Heaven he knew anything of the kind. “Whatever you can pay me — *so*. What you cannot goes in my aggount. I gif you a week. Goot morning.” He rose with a formal bow. “It is a pity. I haf wished to be friendts.”

“Well — why not?” queried Van, hopeful to the last of keeping his seat on both stools. “You lose nothing. It comes hardest on me.”

“Perhaps I shall lose more than you think for,” Schonberg answered in his normal voice. “We are not ‘dead cuts,’ as you say. But never the same — not pozzible.”

“No — bad luck!” muttered Van — and he meant it.

“*Ach* — for you people it is always luck —”

“With just a dash of pluck?”

“*Zo* — I do not deny it —” And they parted without shaking hands.

Van, left alone, subsided into the ‘padded armchair’ — his birthplace — and let the full bitterness of realization sweep over him. All the secure foundations of his personal life were shaken. He had not a ghost of a notion, now, what Schonberg would say to his father. With a little dexterity he could give things an uncommonly ugly look. He recalled, with a pang of

mingled remorse and fear, the nature of their talk at some of those intimate little dinners when Schonberg had been so free with the fizz and old brandy.

No denying, he had been a bit incautious at times in his allusions to departmental matters. Just a harmless and very human weakness for seeming to be 'in the know.' But quite a different colour could be given to it all, as well he knew, being a skilled hand at that invaluable art; and he thanked whatever gods there be that his father's just indignation would have time to cool before they two met face to face. He was bound to be ultimately forgiven; but the interview would be deuced unpleasant, a sharp lesson to him to be more cautious in the future.

Reluctantly enough, he was driven to admit that the net had been spread in the sight of the bird — not altogether in vain. And suddenly it dawned on him that the unflattering admission applied to his country no less than to himself. It was vaguely consoling to reflect that a good few politicians must have found themselves in much the same dilemma, when Germany dropped her mask. Finance behind it, probably, as in his own complication; and no doubt some were in a tighter place than he.

If the larger dilemma condoned and comforted him not a little, so did the certainty of his mother's allegiance; and, above all, the unabashed hope of winning Gabrielle de Vigne. The knowledge that she cared would go far to heal his wounded self-esteem; and a sound marriage might help, eventually, to reinstate him in his father's eyes. To-day he would fix up his mother. To-morrow, first thing, Wynchcombe Friars —

By the time he stood on the steps of Avonleigh House he looked almost himself again.

His mother's greeting was more effusive than usual. "Oh, my darling boy," she murmured, clinging to him, and the fervour of his kiss obliterated hours of doubt and pain. For Marion Blount, in anger, was unsparing as her brother.

"All serene, dear," Van replied to her mute question. "It's no treat being slanged by Father. But — it'll blow over."

"Did he — slang you?"

A mild pugnacity gleamed in her eye.

Van nodded, and gently pressed her down into her chair.
"Don't stand about and get agitated! It's very bad for you."

"But I *am* agitated. I think they're both very unjust and unkind. They exaggerate things. You know Mr. Schonberg better than they do. He *is* all right — isn't he, dear?"

Van pensively fingered his moustache.

"I have no proof to the contrary; and I don't hold with condemning a man out of hand. But — you know what Father's like about Germans."

"Yes. And — about Avonleigh. What — what did he say, darling? Have you brought his letter?"

Van reddened. "No — I burnt it. He said — hard things, that he will probably regret later on. It upset me, naturally; and I didn't see why you should be upset, too. But I'd like to know what earthly right Aunt Marion had to let fly at you. Is it a very choice effusion? May I see it?"

A light that was almost humour invaded his mother's serene eyes.

"It's burnt, too. Such a mistake keeping that sort of thing. The servants — one never knows. It was — hateful! And — I didn't want to upset *you!*"

They exchanged a smile of tender amusement. "How we understand each other, don't we, Van?"

Then she harked back to General Blount. A man who could traduce his own nephew! "It's Uncle Vyvian I'm so angry with — interfering — poisoning Father's mind against you. I really *do* think you should see him or write —"

But Van was very decisive on that score. "Uncle Vyvian's a tough customer, Mother. And we don't hit it off. It's Dirks he favours."

"Yes. I've noticed it. And — I've been thinking — wondering" — she hesitated nervously — "whether — Derek has had anything to do with all this?"

Van started. "*Mother!* Dirks would never let me down."

Her eyes fell. She fingered a long chain she wore. "Of course not. But since he came home he has been very out-

spoken — very critical. You remember how troublesome he was — about Avonleigh last year. And he doesn't like Mr. Schonberg — does he?"

"No."

"Well — you can't tell what he may have said to Uncle Vyvian. He's so tactless sometimes — so clumsy. And I think, nowadays, he's rather jealous — over Father and you." Again she hesitated, and glanced at Van, whose attention seemed to be concentrated on the discovery that a waistcoat button was loose. "I hate saying horrid things of my own son; but Aunt Marion annoyed me. She made — unfair comparisons. And — thinking things over, it seems quite possible some stupid interference of Derek's may be at the bottom of it all."

Still Van was silent, viciously twisting his button till it came off. Of course, he ought to speak up and clear Derek, who had straightly and pluckily tried to save him at the start, and had been scalped for his pains. But he was still smarting from the hurts inflicted by his father, and from the unknown things Aunt Marion had said. His mother's championship had never been more precious to him. And, after all, she was making no base insinuations. If she saw him as a martyr to Uncle Vyvian's and Derek's interference, nothing the others could say against him would shake her obstinate faith. Besides — how *could* he tell what Derek might or might not have said without any thought of doing harm?

Unconsciously, instinctively, he was hedging — as he had hedged over the Satsuma vase seventeen years ago. Something precious had been broken. His mother's instinct — now as then — was to blame Derek, to shield him. And, sooner than undeceive her, he kept silence — leaving Derek to shift for himself.

"It's an unholy muddle. Why blame any one?" he said at last, with vague and quite unconvincing magnanimity. "Let's have lunch."

As she rose he slipped an affectionate hand through her arm. With her he was secure. To-morrow — Gabrielle de Vigne!

CHAPTER XII

*Thy Lady, was thy heart not blind,
One hour gave to thy witless trust
The key thou goest about to find —
And thou hast dropped it in the dust.*

FRANCIS THOMPSON

HE was on the verge of departure next morning when Francis brought in the second post. He would have pocketed it unread, but Karl's handwriting caught his eye. Was it possible—?

He tore open the envelope, scanned the first page—and glanced at Francis, whose eyes were on his face.

"Curse the fellow's impudence!" he thought; but he merely said: "Tell Bennett he must wait a bit—I'm delayed."

"Very good, sir."

The impudent fellow withdrew noiselessly; and Van, in a fever of impatience, sat down to tackle Karl's astonishing letter. Schonberg's boast that he never let two blades grow under his foot was no empty one. It appeared he had motored down to Avonleigh yesterday, and so thoroughly enlightened the unsuspecting Karl that the good fellow begged leave to be released from an anomalous position. It also appeared that for some time Karl had been considering the advisability of such a move.

"My father," he added, "is pressing me again to come into one of his lines of business, which, as you know, does not suit my book. And I have no valid excuse for my refusal but—the Army. Lord Avonleigh, I feel sure, will not want me to remain on—in the unpleasant circumstances; and I would rather make the first move than wait till he gives me the boot. I hate putting you out, old chap. But—that's that!"

Van set his teeth upon a very ugly word. He, the spoilt child of fortune, had a sudden nightmare sense of being tripped

up at every turn. Karl's letter was sympathetic, yet eminently cautious; and it left Van wondering uncomfortably how much of it all had been news to him; how far Schonberg's version of their interview had shaken the implicit faith of ten years. Van was honestly fond of Karl; and, like all egoists in the grain, he claimed, as a right, the devout allegiance of his own world. Till yesterday, he had taken it as a matter of course. To-day he knew it for the breath of his nostrils. Sooner than lose it, he had left his mother under a false impression; and Karl, of all people, must not be allowed to kick over the traces. He did not feel like going to Avonleigh yet awhile; but he must write at once.

After destroying three consecutive sheets of argument and explanation, he decided on an ultimatum in the vein of a happier day.

DEAR OLD MAN,—

In the name of our ancient friendship — why this thusness? Though there has been a bit of a ruction, I refuse to admit that you are involved. And you don't know my father, if you think he could treat you unfairly because of recent untoward events. Honestly, Karl, I can't do without you. What's more, in my opinion, if you chuck a sound job on account of this dust-up, it will look a bit queer. Of course *I* know you're a white man. But why gratuitously blacken your own face and hurt my feelings into the bargain? At least, hang on till Father comes back. I can't manage Avonleigh this weekend, or I would come and convert you in person. I expect a reply by return, in two words — Unconditional surrender.

Yours, till the trump of doom (and it hasn't sounded yet)

E. T. B.

"I back that to do the trick," he thought, sealing his envelope with the Avonleigh crest — a falcon poised for flight, over the motto, "I aspire." He posted the letter himself, in the first pillar-box. Francis had, of late, shown indiscreet signs of curiosity. It might be a sound move to dismiss the fellow.

He dismissed him, forthwith, from his thoughts; cleared the coast, as it were, of every minor issue save his chances with

Miss de Vigne. Things had gone so ill in the past twenty-four hours that they were bound to be near the turn. There flitted through his brain a vision of her as she appeared at the concert, when he had felt that a word, a touch, would bring her into his arms. A foretaste of that crowning moment thrilled through him. The high heavens smiled on his enterprise. Early June opened her passionate heart to him in the scent of the first wild roses and fields carpeted with cloth of gold.

Once he had entered the drive, nervousness took hold of him and he slackened speed. His intense desire to win her almost amounted to a prayer — a vague appeal to some unknown Maker of Destinies.

And in passing the wide yew hedge that bordered the rose garden he caught sight of a woman's figure — unmistakable; armed with a basket, as he had seen her last. His prayer was answered. The luck was in.

He remembered an arched opening in the hedge, and, halting the car in mid-drive, sprang out. Could he only face them all as an accepted lover, it would go far to restore his shaken self-respect.

Under the arch he paused for the pure pleasure of watching her undetected. Both arms were lifted to secure a coveted spray; a charming attitude that showed to perfection the gracious lines of her figure.

But she had heard footsteps. When they ceased, she turned her head — and discovered him. He lifted his cap. She arched her brows over smiling eyes, finished securing her spray, and turned without coming forward.

"So you have arrived, after all?" she greeted him, with baffling sweetness.

He would have held out his hand, but both hers were occupied.
"Not my fault I couldn't come yesterday," he assured her eagerly. "Did Dirks tell you? Did you — expect me?"

"I don't think — I expected you till I saw you!"

She was distractingly mistress of herself.

"An unkind hit. Anyway, I'm here now — to ask forgiveness and something more —"

"Oh, as to forgiveness —" He saw the blood stir under her clear skin.

"I know I don't deserve it," he admitted with a phenomenal humility. "I behaved like a cad. But — please remember — I was simply staggered. And you were so dead keen on that kid. I seemed to count for nothing. And I thought you knew — you must know — I love you. I was hoping to tell you that morning —"

"And — yet —?"

The words fell like drops of cold wafer into the fevered haste of his unstudied speech. The look in her eyes, as she stood there — so alluring, so strangely unapproachable — made him feel less than ever in command of the situation.

"Oh, can't you — *won't* you understand?" he pleaded with genuine passion. "I confess it gave me a horrid jar; and your inflexible attitude made me feel — it would be useless to speak. In fact — if it's cards on the table, I thought — if I held off a bit — you might —"

"Don't — please don't." She checked him with a distressed twitch of her brows. "I am not without heart. I can't bear to hurt you. But — it *is* useless."

"You have changed your mind — about the child? I thought —"

"He told you?" she queried, a soft light in her eyes.

"Of course he did. And as the obstacle — the misunderstanding — has been removed — *will* you —"

His eyes implored her. He held out both hands. Only one of hers was free, and with it she grasped the back of the bench near the pergola.

"You don't seem to realize," she said gently, "there still remains the chief obstacle — myself."

Even he could not fail to see the truth in her eyes, in the pained compression of her lips; and the unaccustomed pang of baulked desire made him almost angry.

"You? — Then *what* have you been at all this time? I could have sworn — have you been fooling me from the start?"

"No — no." She flushed hotly, and her small, even teeth

imprisoned her lip. "It is simply that I took you for — one sort of man. I find you are another. I also mistook myself. One is not infallible. And — after what happened, I did not believe you could really — care." She glanced at her watch. "I have no business to stay here talking. I ought to be in the ward."

"The ward can wait. Do sit down and give me a chance. I — I can't take it in."

She gave him an odd, direct look. "Yet — you have my answer."

"And I refuse to accept a woman's 'No' out of hand."

He clinched matters by sitting down himself. With a sigh she followed suit; and he, resting an elbow on the rail, leaned urgently towards her. "In what *way* am I another sort of man — and since when? Have you —? Has any one —?"

"Quite the reverse," she answered with a small, enigmatic smile. "Give me credit for a little discernment!"

Had she been other than herself he could scarce have kept his hands off her. But this rose was set about with something more intangible than thorns. "Was your discernment asleep at the start?" he pressed her.

"Did you, at the start, give it a fair chance? Or did you disguise your true self in colours that were more becoming — more likely to suit my taste? Is it — playing the game to try and steal a woman's heart that way?"

"Did I steal it?" he urged, ignoring the indictment even while he winced at it. "And — is forgiveness impossible? I thought — if a woman cared —"

"Forgiveness, of course, is a woman's chief function," Gabrielle murmured confidentially to her basket of flowers; and he only half detected the note of irony in her rebuke. "A divine attribute. *But* — we are also human. We have our idiosyncrasies. Myself — I can forgive much — if there is truth in the inward parts. Not otherwise."

At that he changed colour. He had asked for it; and he was getting it. Yet — even so, he could not accept irrevocable defeat.

"But — if I had spoken — that night?"

"You did not speak," she reminded him with gentle inflexibility. "And — since you force me to be frank — even that night — you were different. Next morning — more so still. Then your absence — your long silence. If I have come to doubt you — and myself, it is chiefly your own doing. Doubt in one direction breeds doubt everywhere. I have even wondered — were you sincere about wishing to play a man's part in the War? For me, life is intensely *real* — in work or play. With you it is all *laissez-faire*. I realize now — that we could no more mix than fire and water. In everything you say or do there is always the one black spot — self — self —!"

She broke off. Approaching voices and footsteps brought her to her feet. "I really *must* go in. Surely I have said enough — more than enough?"

"Curse those fellows," muttered Van, obliged to follow suit. "Look here, I'm off. I can't face them all. As for what you said — May I write?"

"No, please — it will only hurt us both."

She gave him her hand. He held it close and long; and she only just made good her escape before Derek and Baird, coming from the opposite direction, appeared on the scene.

There were exclamations and greetings, and Baird's hope of a drive was quenched by a hurried announcement that Van had merely run down on business and must get back at once.

"Business — with me?" Derek asked; and by the look in his eyes Van knew he had heard all.

He nodded, in order to get rid of Baird, who tactfully effaced himself — leaving the brothers alone.

There was a moment of strained silence. Van waited for a lead; Derek waited for confirmation of the thing he could not believe.

"Well — you seem mighty pleased to see me!" Van flung out with a carelessness he was far from feeling. "I wrote — didn't you expect me?"

"No."

"Why the devil —?"

"Is it necessary to ask?"

Van — who was suffering from a surfeit of home truths — did not press the point. "As it happens, I might have spared myself the trouble and saved my petrol," he remarked in a changed voice, frowning at the empty seat where the ghost of Gabrielle still seemed to sit with her roses. "I've seen her. You two interrupted us. She won't look at me, infant or no infant. Laid it on with a trowel in her tender anxiety to make things horrid clear. The curse of it is she's only succeeded in making me keener than ever. She's one in a thousand. I'll marry her yet."

He broke off and glanced sidelong at Derek's set face.

"Heard from India this mail?" he asked.

"Yes."

"Father been laying it on with a trowel also?"

"He's very angry, of course. The whole thing seems to have come as a shock. And I thought — I hoped you had told him all about the Hospital. God knows how you could take the risk —!"

"Oh, go it! Kick a man when he's down."

"Sorry. I didn't mean it that way."

Van was manipulating a cigarette.

"That I'm hard hit over it all goes without saying. But — at this moment, I find it difficult to think of anything except Miss de Vigne. If you'd just offered her your heart and had it returned with thanks, you might possibly understand. But as I don't seem to see *you* handing your heart about on a salver —"

"My dear chap, I understand all *that* right enough," Derek struck in with repressed vehemence. "What I don't understand is —"

"Oh, shut it!"

And Derek, nothing loath, took the elegant hint.

"Have you seen Schonberg?" he asked.

"My God, yes! You were more or less right in that quarter — if it gives you any satisfaction to know it."

"*Me?* Rather not. Get clear of him now, Van — and keep clear."

Van groaned. "I've had a shot at it. But — fact is — there are wheels within wheels. I tell you, Dirks, I'm in the hell of a hole. You don't even begin to grasp the true inwardness of my most enviable position. Of course, it's rotten hard luck on Father. But I'm responsible — and all that —"

Derek gave him a quick look.

"Quite so. That's why it's beyond me . . . how you could ask Miss de Vigne —"

"But, my dear fellow, I thought — I hoped — she cared. With her to stand by me I could somehow pull things through. I say, Dirks — you've been stunning about it; and if any of this leaks out, you might put in a good word for me. I don't want her to think me more of a sweep than she seems to do already. There's something about her — I've never believed in the high-flown talk of a woman lifting a man. It's mostly the other way. But she — if she cared — if she'd only have an ounce of faith in me — I'm convinced she could pull me up a peg or two. I've been smitten often; but I've never felt that way before —"

He started. His ear had caught the thud of Mark's crutch and his dragging walk along the terrace.

"God! Here comes Forsyth! The last man I want to run into. So long, old chap. Don't be more down on me than you can help. I can't enlarge on my sensations; but the toad beneath the harrow isn't in it. And I can say to you — what I wouldn't to any one else — I'm downright ashamed of the whole cursed affair."

He held out his hand — an unusual event. Derek — feeling angry and wretched — wrung it hard.

"Father sent me that para," he said. "But — I want to know more."

"Well — I'll make out some sort of a tale. Or you might square a few days' leave. Here comes your almighty Mark. I can nip out through the arch. My car's in the drive."

Three minutes later the great Rolls-Royce shot through the

iron gateway full speed, and down the long slope to the high-road. The swiftness and the movement were a very real relief after the emotional strain he had passed through. But they sharply recalled his fatuous sensations on the downward journey, his foretaste of the supreme moment that never came off.

It was one of Van's foibles that, even in seriousness, he could seldom express himself seriously; but his simile of toad and harrow was less extravagant than it sounded. Little used to denial or criticism, he was suffering acutely from the unfamiliar sense of helplessness in the grip of adverse circumstance; and his pain was intensified by the gnawing of the little black worm — self-pity. With all his knowledge of the world, he lacked the deeper knowledge of life that includes capacity for suffering — lifts it, almost, to a fine art; and he would probably go to his grave lacking it still.

His vanity and self-esteem had been badly battered. His heart was seriously involved. That he, of all men, should love, unloved —!

"By God!" he thought with a sudden uprush of confidence renewed. "I'll force her to respect me yet. If I chuck my job to join the Army it will be proof positive I'm dead in earnest. I believe she could love any sort of blighter in khaki."

It was a magnificently drastic resolve; and it served him well as an anodyne during the long drive back to town.

CHAPTER XIII

*Well, it is lost now. Well — you must bear;
But hush! For you, can be no despair.*

BROWNING

AND while Van's wounded egoism writhed under the unaccustomed pangs of refusal, of seeing himself, for once, as another saw him, Gabrielle was busy arranging her roses in the morning room, that served for meals, since the dining-room had been given over to the soldiers. She could not bear hurting men; and he was not the first whom she had been obliged to hurt in that particular way. But on this occasion — no denying it — regret was tempered with relief at having got it over. The knowledge that this blow must be dealt, and dealt decisively, had been weighing upon her all the week; dimming the glory of her own private discovery; her tentative hope that it was shared by Some One Else, who had driven Gabrielle Honoré — with her prudent plans and contempt of thrills — incontinently from the field. Honesty compelled her to admit that, from the first, her heart had secretly inclined to him, while her brain — intent on practical politics — discreetly ignored the fact. Now that he had unconsciously revealed his soul to her, she could ignore it no longer. And she was glad — immeasurably glad. She knew, now, the lover's keen-edged joy in the simplest actions; the feeling of life so sharpened that sights and sounds, the most familiar, smite the senses like a revelation. She dispensed rations and shirts and socks in a transfigured world —

And her woman's instinct told her that the discovery was mutual, though Derek had given no sign beyond the negative one of seeming to avoid opportunities for talk. What matter? Merely to be with him sufficed; to hear his deep, deliberate voice; to see, with enlightened eyes, his familiar face, his blunt

features worn fine by more than physical suffering. The seal of it on his lips and the shadow of it in his eyes, gave his whole aspect a sort of strained nobility that sharply caught at her heart. Wonderful to discover how she loved his every trait:—the critical, yet far from passionless, detachment that made his judgment so singularly just and true; the very streak in him that might make him slow to come forward even when he knew the way was clear. A marvel that they should have lived so long under one roof without finding each other out! The self-evident answer was — Van. Small wonder if his pain — and her own pain in inflicting it — were crowded, all too soon, out of her very much occupied mind and heart.

After lunch she took half a dozen of her charges down to fish in the Wynch. Derek was not among them. She had not seen him since that distressful interlude in the rose garden. Baird mentioned casually that Mr. Blount had turned up to see his brother on business; but had gone straight back without giving them a treat. Then she knew whose footsteps had cut short her ordeal: and again — she was glad. At that moment of high tension, Van could not possibly have kept his own counsel — if she knew anything of the man.

Returning later to the house, she found two letters on the salver: Mrs. Macnair and her stepfather. She carried them to her room, and sitting in her chair by the window opened Burlington's envelope first.

MY DARLING GAY [she read], —

Your last welcome letter has remained too long unanswered. The fact is — I have bad news for you, and I have been shirking a painful job. It is about your money — your 'dot' —

She caught her breath sharply and her eye raced over the rest of the sheet.

I ought to have told you everything long ago. But I kept hoping it would be a case of all's well that ends well. Now you say you are contemplating marriage, I can wait no longer. Forgive me, if you can, my dearest, and believe that I have had one motive only — to do the best for you.

The facts are as follows: Your dear mother, as you know, made me her sole executor. I left the interest on her money to accumulate for you — Canadian bonds, safe as houses. Later on, some big deals I had on with Schonberg brought me in a tidy lump of capital; and my first thought was, to add part of it to your marriage portion. Schonberg was putting his own stuff into a big German concern with the Government behind it; and he was keen I should follow suit. I said half the money was going in with your bonds. He said: 'Why not transfer the lot? Higher interest. Safe as any number of houses.' I havered over it for some time; but in the end I gave in. I admit, in those days, he had a queer kind of hold on me.

You remember I told you I had made a better arrangement for you. But I did not say it was connected with Schonberg or Germany because of your prejudice against both. I thought — why should you lose good money because of a mere girl's whim? We get to think too much in terms of money, we business men. And I wasn't the only man in England who believed we should never fight Germany. I knew something of the financial and commercial complications; and I believed — like many of my betters — that the purse strings ruled the world.

Then the War came — and I had not the heart to tell you the truth. So I paid you the dividends myself. I felt sure it would not last more than six months or a year — the purse strings again.

But I'm rambling. The point is, I want to do all I can to mend the muddle I have made of your affairs, with the best intentions on earth. I only wish I could repay you the lot out of my own capital. But a large part of my money went the same way as yours, with the result that I am a good deal more indebted to Schonberg than I quite care about — in the circumstances. The truth is he has managed to secure a large preponderance of shares for himself and his friends. That means increasing control of the votes and the capital. I tell you this, because any repayment I make at present could only consist of transferring shares to your name; and I doubt if you would care to become a shareholder in the firm as it now stands. Lord Avonleigh sold out long ago. But young Mr. Blount has a few shares. He seems to be down there a good deal. May I venture to hope he is not to be the happy man?

Well, my darling girl — I want you to let me go on paying your dividends. It is the best I can offer in the way of reparation; and I can manage all right about the boys, who have a good deal to forgive

their old Dad. So, for that matter, have you. But, for the sake of our dear Dead, let me do what I can to atone.

Ever and always your loving Dad

JOHN BURLTON

Those last lines calmed, a little, the pain and anger in her heart, and brought stinging tears to her eyes. The whole thing was so bewildering, so unexpected, such a pitiless cold douche upon her fervid hopes and dreams —!

Her hand that held the letter dropped into her lap; and she sat there motionless, in the June sunshine, looking blindly out over the wonderful downward and upward sweep of pine tops, that was Mark's peculiar delight and pride, while the waters of bitterness flowed over her soul.

For money, in detail, she cared little, as do many generous natures, who have never known the relentless grind of life's machinery without it. But, in the form of her marriage portion, it was the cornerstone of things. Without her '*dot*,' she could not, or would not marry. Neither would she consent to be a drain on her stepfather at the expense of Jacko's brothers, whose prospects had dwindled woefully as it was.

She had often felt irritated — not unreasonably — with her lovable, limited stepfather; but to-day, for the first time, she felt angry, bitterly angry; and to feel so, hurt her almost as much as her own loss. Those bonds were not his to meddle with. The more implicit her mother's trust in him, the less his right to touch them, even with unimpeachable intentions. On that score, she was sternly emphatic. And — it was not like him. It was simply one more proof of Schonberg's fatal dominion over him, body and soul —

The commanding tones of the gong startled her out of her trance. There were people to tea; and hurriedly tidying her hair, she resolved to escape as soon as possible. A long lonely tramp would give her breathing space to confront everything, including her fatally awakened heart, and to make all the necessary decisions.

Tea was on the terrace. Sir Nevil and Lady Sinclair had

brought three Indian officers, and Flora Melrose some convalescents from Westover. Half a dozen of her own men were there, Derek among them. In such a crowd it was easy to avoid him; but though she set the width of the terrace between the image of herself and the image of him, the actual Derek so persistently intruded on her consciousness that it was almost as if her senses were deceived. Defying his intrusion, she concentrated her attention on a remarkably cultivated young Indian officer whom she had already met in Paris. But at the first opportunity she discarded him, caught Sheila at an isolated moment, and said quietly: "If you can spare me, dear, I'm dying for a tramp up to the ridge."

Sheila looked concerned. It was unlike Gay to desert a terrace full of soldiers.

"All by your lonely?" she asked.

"Yes. I've some stiff thinking to do — with the help of my pines!"

Sheila's smile expressed amused understanding. "Run along, then," she said, "to the only committee you don't despise! And come back filled with wisdom."

So she went. And she knew that the image of Derek watched her go; and she felt the actual Derek tugging her heart. What would he think if he guessed that this transitory going was but the first step towards going altogether? For to that resolve she had come; and, hardened in that resolve, by contact with the 'stern mother whom no cry can melt,' she was minded to return —

On she walked and on; down the broad main pathway, carpeted with moss and clumps of coarse grass. On either side of her crowded and receded the trunks of lofty old pines, with their companionable illusion of movement, as if they were treading a measure of some slow and stately dance. The wester-ing sun painted their stems rust red and a light south wind stirred their dark summits. Gnats buzzed up and down like motes in a beam. Forest flies hung motionless in a dazzle of gold. It was a magical evening; an evening to catch an echo from the inner harmony of things; to fling wide the doorway of the heart

and bid love enter in; not to bar the gate against him for lack of a marriage dower —

None of them would understand: not even Sheila. In the depths of her own being there were elements that rebelled. But the fact remained that she was her father's daughter: in nothing more so than in this proud, practical attitude towards marriage. And there is no more stubborn customer than unreasoning inherited instinct — a racial instinct to boot. She could only pray that Derek's heart was a less volcanic organ than she had discovered her own to be. Happy for him that he had no drop of passionate Latin blood in his veins. For herself, she must take up fresh work elsewhere — France for choice. She would accept a small allowance: some measure of independence she must possess. Thank God she had a brain and a catholic love of her kind. For all that, in her eyes, marriage was the end of ends — whether for man or woman; now more imperatively so than ever —

At last she reached the ridge. The great pinewood lay behind her; and before her a wide stretch of open country all misty in the gold dust of evening. With a sigh from the depths she flung herself on the heather, and lay there, lost to all sense of time —

CHAPTER XIV

No heart to dare, is no heart to love.

GEORGE MEREDITH

AT WYNCHCOMBE FRIARS they were first puzzled, then a trifle anxious, as the dinner hour drew near and still no sign of Gabrielle. A sense of time and a sense of duty were both so strong in her, that she would never be oblivious of either except for a very serious reason.

So said Sheila to Derek, whom she found hanging about on the terrace, looking restless and unhappy for no ostensible cause. If she had a true-lover's inkling that their thoughts were travelling in the same direction, it was not for her to embarrass him by letting him know it. She and Mark, having heard of Van's meteoric visit, had achieved a simple sum in arithmetic to their entire satisfaction; and Mark, in his vigorous fashion, had expressed a hope that Derek would at last give up 'playing the ruddy altruist' on account of his unworthy brother.

"Love, the sole-permitted, sings sovereignly of I and *me*," he quoted from his favourite poet. "High time old Derek gave the 'Sole-permitted' a fighting chance."

Perhaps Derek was of the same mind. At least he did not attempt to hide his concern from Sheila's sympathetic eyes.

"D'you know where she went?" he asked.

"She said — to the ridge."

He hesitated. "Shall I — take a stroll in that direction?" he suggested, looking away from her.

"Can you walk so far?"

"I can try. It might not be necessary. May I go?"

He faced her squarely now and there was no mistaking the look in his eyes.

"Yes — go! And — good luck to you. I'll tell Mark."

"Thanks," said inexpressive Derek; and went down the shallow stone steps, scarcely limping at all, walking like a man in a dream.

As he entered the wood — where the level light flung lengthening shadows — he was beset by that strange yet familiar sense of knowing precisely what would happen next, of having been there before.

A June evening; a pine forest; a girl astray; his offer to go in search of her —

Vividly, startlingly, it all flashed back upon him. Even to Mrs. Maggot's cynical remark: "She knows, well enough, if she stops out there, you'll go and look for her."

The coincidence amazed him. It also made him rather anxious. Was the omen good or bad, he wondered; and the next moment chid himself for superstitious folly. He had hardly got over his bewilderment, his unashamed relief at her refusal of Van; and its possible significance had not yet dawned on him. But — as astonishment subsided, Hope whispered: "There is just a chance — why not?" And that whisper had prompted his bold request. He had flung away so many chances. This one, at least, he would seize — and dare Fate to do her worst.

He felt half afraid he had done for himself by that unpremeditated impulse to tell her all about Lois. Since then, he had been aware of a change in her, that he could only feel but not define. Well — very soon — when he found her — he would know.

And all the while, at the back of things, his troublesome conscience nagged at him, insisting that he must first make quite sure there was no more hope for Van. His brother's parting appeal, with its rare mingling of humility and genuine feeling, had left a deep impression — as it was doubtless meant to do. Van was, after all, heir to Avonleigh and its great traditions. If Miss de Vigne had it in her power to make a finer, more stable man of him, it behoved him, Derek — if only for love of Avonleigh — to do what he could. Failing that —!

He broke off, his heart gave a great leap and all the strength seemed to melt out of him.

In the distance he had sighted a blue figure hurrying down the pathway from the ridge. The next moment she saw him; and she, too, came to a dead stop. For a second, it seemed almost as if she would turn back or strike off among the trees. Did she actually want to avoid him? Ought he not to have come?

Impossible to regret it. But because of her hesitation, and also because of his wretched physical disabilities in moments of stress, he did not go forward; merely stood watching her approach. Every line of her was grace, lightly clothed with dignity, instinct with the *joie de vivre* that radiated from her like an aura. She held her head a little higher than usual as if mentally defying some one or some thing; and he put up a prayer that it might not be himself. He had not an idea what he meant to say when she reached him. He felt as if the impact of their spirits must be electrical; that, in a flash, he would know and be known —

But life is a clumsy dramatist; and, when the moment came, Gabrielle solved his difficulty by saying in a rather breathless rush: "I'm *so* sorry! Wicked of me. Did they send you to look for the sheep that was lost?"

In spite of constriction, he somehow found his normal voice: "They didn't send me. Sheila was worried and — I offered to come. It's dinner time. You must be hungry. You hardly touched your tea." He gravely produced a stick of chocolate. "Better sit down a minute and eat that."

Her smile had a tremor in it. "How like you!"

But she accepted it gratefully; and no less gratefully availed herself of a pine stump that formed a providential stool. The electric shock, though it produced no lightning, had been more than a lover's fantasy.

He leaned against a neighbouring trunk and watched her, wondering — what next? Right over her hung a vast white cloud all sunset-flushed. A three-quarter moon was coming to life. It was their moment. Every nerve in him rebelled against having to mention Van.

"Have you been tramping all the time?" he asked at length.

"No. Mostly lying on the heather." She indicated her bare left wrist. "I forgot my watch. But that's no excuse. I ought to have known."

In spite of her, a small sigh escaped; and he grew bolder.

"Were you worrying? Was it —?"

She looked up quickly and saw the knowledge in his eyes.

"He told you?"

"Yes. I confess — I was surprised. I thought —"

"You thought you had successfully smoothed the way for him —?"

Derek said nothing.

And because silence was dangerous, she went on: "I hated having to hurt him so. But — he persisted —"

"Poor fellow! I don't think he quite knew what to make of — a refusal. He's not been reared on refusals — of any kind."

"Poor fellow!" she echoed without irony. "There is much virtue in them."

"But in this case," he ventured, "the loss altogether outweighs the gain."

Her expressive eyebrows twitched. She began to suppose herself mistaken, after all. "Are you — commissioned — to speak for him?" she asked. "Do you really think —?"

"I think" — he plunged desperately — "how can I help thinking that a wife — like yourself — might be the making of Van. He so obviously needs some stable purpose, some clear inspiration in his life. Now — he's utterly cut up. I wouldn't wonder — if he tried again."

"Oh, no — no."

Derek's fingers gripped the crutch handle of his stick. But she did not notice it. She was chewing thoughtfully, looking away among the trees, marvelling at her fatuous mistake and telling herself she ought to feel relieved.

"But — surely — at one time —?" he persisted: and she could almost have arisen and struck him.

"At one time — yes," she agreed in measured tones. "But

now — emphatically, *no*. I am not a mere weathercock. I was blind. Now I see. I have partly to thank my *pion-pion* for that; partly — some one else. I don't presume to judge your brother. He is clever — charming — up to a point. But marriage — no. He has every recommendation — except himself. Oh, don't let's talk about it." The gold flecks in her eyes were alight. "He is — *your* brother. You have done all you can for him. But please understand, it is useless. I know, now — he is not the kind of man I would *dream* of marrying."

He was silent a moment; his inarticulateness alive with the ardour of his hope. And at last — purely on impulse he spoke. "What kind of man — I wonder — *would* you dream of marrying?"

The speculative quiet of his voice effectually belied him.

"Oh, his very opposite — in every way —!" she flung out with heated emphasis. Then, her cheeks on fire, she rose abruptly. "But there's no question of marriage — now. And we must hurry back. You said — Sheila was worried."

Without a word, he moved forward and stood confronting her — a changed Derek.

"Sheila will know you are safe — with me. And after all you have said — you *must* wait and hear — what I have to say."

His tone had more of command in it than appeal. His whole face was alive, as she had never seen it yet; and the restrained force of the man so emanated from him that — although she had the whole space of the wood and knew he would not lay a hand on her — to move aside and go past him seemed almost a physical impossibility.

Seeing her hesitate and colour hotly, he added with a new and disarming gentleness: "Will you listen — Even if it's no use? I must speak — now —"

He paused to steady his voice. This time she saw how sharply he gripped the crutch of his stick; and the change in him, the volcanic response of her own heart, blinded her momentarily, to all lesser things.

Unseen hands were wrenching her this way and that; and to ease their mutual strain she cried out impatiently: "Oh, *why* have you, all this time, been playing his hand — pleading his cause —?"

A half smile flickered in Derek's eyes. "There didn't seem to be — any other cause. And naturally I wished — the best for him. — How could I imagine —? He's always been the favoured one —"

"Not *here!*" she flashed with decision.

"That's only because Mark is my best friend."

"It's not. It's because their standards are real ones. They don't use the world's yard measure here. But, oh — where's the use of talking, when everything has gone to pieces? That's why I came away — to escape — from myself — from you —"

"*Gabrielle!*" He spoke her name with no loverly hesitation, real or feigned, but with a passion of tenderness and protest, and with the true French intonation she loved. "Are you — crazed?"

"I wish I was!" Her voice shook; and she drew the fatal letter out of her pocket. "I've heard from Dad — all my money — my marriage portion — clean gone. Read it — please. It's too long — too maddening to explain —"

He took the letter, saw it was a long one, and said gently: "Sit down, please."

It was a luxury to obey him, even trivially, when he spoke and looked like that. Also, she foresaw a battle — and she would need all her strength. Would he be strong enough, she wondered, to overmaster her pride, her unreasoned conviction that she could not, empty-handed, give herself to any man. Or would he be too diffident — too scrupulous —?

It was precisely that mingling of diffidence and still strength that she so loved in him: and one could not always tell which would prevail.

While he read, her gaze never left his face. She saw his frown deepen, his resolute lower lip drawn in. Then, unexpectedly, he looked up and saw — before she could veil it — her heart mirrored in her eyes.

He closed his own a moment, as if a blaze of sunlight had flashed in them. Then he said quietly: "Schonberg again! They ought to make it good — between them. But — I am still mystified. If it's a mere matter of money, why should you so desperately need to escape — from yourself — from me — ? I warn you" — he added, lower still — "the last is impossible."

"Oh, but — can't you understand?" Instinctively she rose to combat him. "It's not mere money — it's my marriage portion. No self-respecting Frenchwoman would marry without it. And — I am French — very much so, in this respect."

"But *I* am English," he retorted; and the thrill of pride in his tone went through her like a note of organ music. "Naturally, I regret, I resent the loss — for you. For myself, I don't care whether you come to me with twenty thousand in bonds or a five-pound note — "

"But *I* care more intensely than *I* can make you understand. For me, it upsets the balance of things. The woman's contribution is a privilege — a duty: and if you are to have the small estate, you must, all the more, look to the future. The idea is bred in my bones. And Mother wisely encouraged it. She thought it right and proper."

"So it is — in principle. But when it amounts to putting the cart before the horse — "

"Still a principle *is* a principle," insisted logical France, shaken a little, yet unconvinced.

He sighed. "You have me there. But this one, thank God, is not bred in my bones. It is yourself I want. Neither less nor more. I can't offer you all that Van could offer. I can only work — and do my utmost to make up to you. But of course" — diffidence tripped him up — "if my solitary contribution is — not good enough — "

"*Derek!* If you are going to be cruel —!"

She made a move as if to slip past him. But, quick as thought, he dropped his stick and caught her hands in both his own.

"It is *you* who are cruel." His voice was impatient, almost

angry. "Standing there — splitting hairs about money, when you've practically admitted — Oh, my dear — don't be a fool!" He checked himself and reddened furiously. "Forget me! I didn't mean that —"

"You did! And it was lovely of you to say it!" Her mouth quivered. Tears sprang to her eyes. All her defences were down.

"I'd far rather you called me a fool than an angel —"

"But you are an angel."

"No — no! Don't spoil it, please."

"It's you who are spoiling it. Who's using the world's yard measure this time? Now we've got at the truth, nothing else counts — in heaven or earth."

He dropped her hands and opened his arms — mutely beseeching.

"Oh, Derek," she breathed. "It's utterly wrong."

"It's utterly right," he countered, his eyes deep in hers: and with a low sound, half speech, half sob, she leaned to him —

Enough of words. They had reached the heart of truth. A new and unresented limit had been placed upon her life. And while he stood holding her to him — as a man holds the most sacred thing on earth — all the repressed force and fire of him seemed to pass silently from him to her. There is an electricity of the spirit; lightning flashes of vision, of communion vouchsafed to hearts charged with a great passion, greatly controlled. It is the gift of gifts to those who have not squandered their capacity for emotion by the way.

To Gabrielle, it seemed an age — a wonderful golden age — that he held her thus; without speaking or moving or attempting to kiss her. Only she could feel his heart beating in slow, uneven strokes against her own.

At last he loosened his hold a little. "Gabrielle," he whispered, his mouth close to her hair. "Not repenting? Was I rough — did I force your hand?"

For answer, she lifted her head and looked at him; her eyes mistily tender, her heart exultant, her reasonable brain, at the back of it all, intrusively demanding — why this ecstasy

of contact with one only human being of all the millions on earth —?

And as if her lips had asked that impermissible question, Derek suddenly caught her close again — and kissed them . . .

Leisurely and happily they walked homeward through the wood; hand in hand like a pair of children.

The sunset glow had faded, and as day waned, moss and fern and whortleberry seemed to emit a still green radiance of their own. Ebbing waves of twilight and the gossamer of young moon-beams conjured the open spaces of the forest into isles of enchantment. The gnats had made an end of their dancing. The south wind had dropped asleep. Not a sound anywhere save a hushed whisper in the tree tops or the chance low note of a bird. And, pale gold among the shadowy pine stems, the moon herself accompanied them; now hidden, now emerging, pencilling with light the edges of fern and trunk and bough — a spirit, intimately linked with earth.

For a time the silence of a great content enfolded them. It was joy and wonder enough simply to be walking thus, seeing and feeling all things in unison —

The whirring of a night-jar broke the stillness. They stopped involuntarily and listened — as if to a miracle.

“Enter these enchanted woods, You who dare!” Gabrielle quoted under her breath. “Derek — how dared we?”

“I suppose because — we are lovers,” he answered simply. “That’s my excuse for daring so greatly this evening, that no other achievement in that line will surprise me again!”

Her smile was a caress.

“Personally, I think it was far more daring — in the circumstances, to come out and assail me about your — Van!”

At that word the actual thrust a rude hand into their Eden. Derek looked whimsically distressed.

“I’m afraid — I’d forgotten Van. If we tell them all, now — the very same day — it would be too cruel —”

“Perhaps if he heard, simultaneously, about my money — ?” she ventured, with a wicked twitch of her brows.

"Gabrielle! Haven't you been sufficiently unkind to him — poor old chap! Of course we can tell Mark and Sheila. But for the others — will you wait a week — to please me?"

Her eyes dwelt on him with inexpressible tenderness — and suddenly they were filled with tears.

"*Mais — je t'adore!*" she whispered, feeling less shy of the confession in French than in English. And without a word, he took her in his arms.

The shyness, the sacredness of his first kiss had not prepared her for the passionate fervour of his second, that fused them in a common fire and lifted her to the heights —

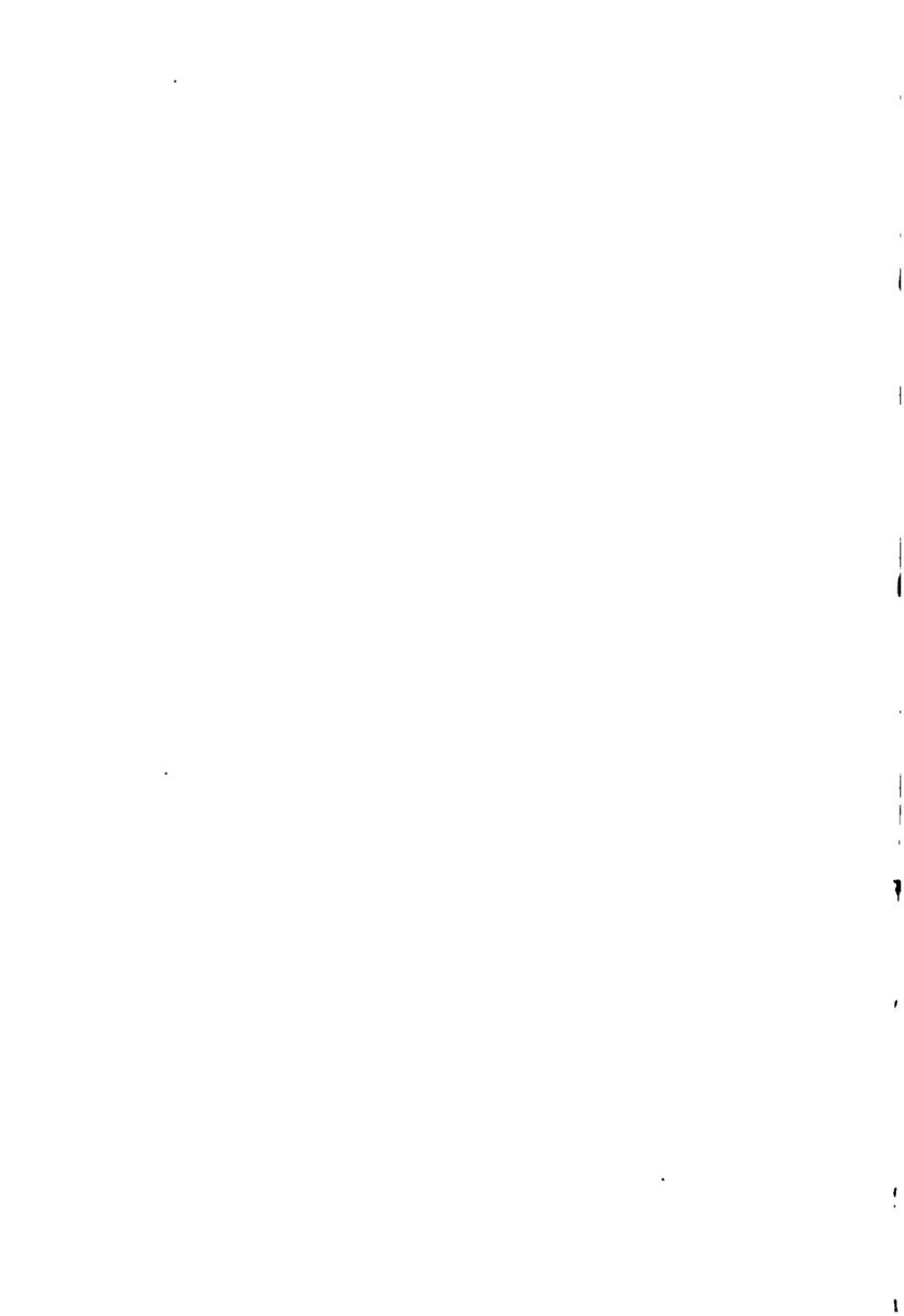
This new Derek was something bigger, more forcible, than even she had dreamed.

Then they took hands again and walked on home, radiantly companioned by their guardian spirit — the moon.

END OF BOOK V



BOOK VI
THE PROUD FUTURE



BOOK VI THE PROUD FUTURE

CHAPTER I

*We stand opposed by such means
As you yourself have forged against yourself
By violation of all faith and troth.*

Henry IV, Part I

THE opening glory of June, that year, was darkened by the sudden and tragic passing of Lord Kitchener. England, bereft of that master-spirit, seemed to lose a cubit of her stature. A world of warring nations turned their thoughts from strife a moment, to mourn him. The very heavens wept. June, for all her roses, was a month of leaden skies and drenching storms. But the fruits of his superhuman labours were ripening; and the face of July was irradiated by the triumph of the Somme.

Tragedy or triumph, the strain of War was telling heavily on one devoted Englishman, who still chafed at his enforced separation from England in her greatest hour. Happily, even in Bombay, there were battles to be fought for her, victories — bloodless and inglorious — to be won. For here, in the guise of sedition and the factitious cry — 'India, a Nation,' the enemy was entrenched in his most insidious form. The intricate task of sifting legitimate aspiration from sedition in sheep's clothing taxed Lord Avonleigh's keen brain to the utmost and made heavy inroads on his reserves of strength. Between work and worry and an enervating climate, he was in no fit state to sustain the shock of Van's defection and the presentation of Schonberg's 'little account,' accompanied by a letter that was a masterpiece of insinuation cunningly overlaid.

Suavely and skilfully, the German struck back at both father and son, wounding each through the other. He took credit to himself, with due modesty, for having discerned and checked a good deal of undesirable activity in the neighbourhood of Avonleigh, even to ferreting out a secret wireless installation on Burnt Hill. Proof conclusive of his zeal in the interests of his young friend, whose aristocratic mind was too innately noble to harbour distrust, or to risk striking unfairly. Mere men of business had need to be of another make. A brief allusion to the Hospital staff was in the same vein. Lord Avonleigh would find it free of undesirable elements. Let a man be judged by his actions. If editors of no repute maligned him, if his motives were called in question, there still remained the satisfaction of having served his friend. Since Lord Avonleigh had seen fit to come between them, he was constrained — in the way of business — to demand payment of certain loans which Mr. Blount, it seemed, could not conveniently meet . . .

And so on and so forth, in polished periods as venomous in essence as they were plausible in fact.

The more ostentatiously he spread the cloak of his magnanimity over Van's slackness, the harder it became for Van's father to still the insistent doubt. Had his son, in bald terms, been politely bribed to keep his aristocratic eyes closed, while Schonberg advertised his loyalty by ferreting out designs of his own contriving, whenever suspicion reared its head? In that case — how far did Van realize —?

A question so grave, so far-reaching, he could not bring himself to broach on paper. Even in anger, a certain tenderness for the son he had trusted, in the teeth of obvious failings, impelled him rather to suffer the pangs of doubt than risk hurting Van by the hint of a suspicion that might be unjust. Face to face, he could probe him unsuspected; and trust his own eyes to see true. Schonberg's account, which he paid without comment, drew from him one more stern rebuke; and thereafter the subject was ignored. But his letters became infrequent; and his rare expressions of affection ceased altogether.

By these negative tokens, alone, was the truth brought home to Van that his father's anger was no mere volcanic overflow, guaranteed to cool down in time, but an inexorable change of heart; and the aching sense of loss, following upon Gabrielle's defection, brought him within measurable distance of humility. It even induced a fit of moral indigestion, which just stopped short of propelling him into the Army. Gabrielle being out of court, that brave impulse had died a natural death. So entirely was it linked with his desire for her, that he failed to see in it the sole act whereby he might have acquired merit in his father's eyes. Instead, he merely dismissed Francis; cursed Schonberg and the War and his luck; everything, in fact, except the root of all his troubles — himself.

Even his mother's unbounded faith and affection failed to redress the balance of things. To her he breathed no word of the change in his father's letters or of his own unsuccess with Miss de Vigne. He thanked his stars he had all along been reticent on that score. The shock and surprise of her engagement left him utterly confounded. Derek — first-rate fellow though he was — struck him as the last sort of man to capture a woman's heart. The loss of her fortune — no denying it — helped to ease his pain; and his magnanimous letter of congratulation was vitiated only by a faint glow of self-satisfaction and a cherished hope that Derek would share it with Gay — as indeed he did.

"Here's luck to you both," it concluded after a page of mild self-depreciation. "You deserve it. All I ask is — don't invite *me* to play best man or to dance at the wedding. And tell Gay (I may call her that now) I can't forgive her yet awhile for stealing a poor devil's heart when she pretty obviously had no sort of use for it."

They were constrained, nevertheless, to request his presence at Wynchmere Church on the 9th of August and afterwards at Wynchcombe Friars. His polite excuses were accompanied by a cheque for Derek and a pearl pendant for the bride. Lady Avonleigh also excused herself on the score of health; and also gilded her refusal with gifts. In her heart of hearts she was

jealous for Van; and, with more than feminine unreason, chose to regard it almost as an act of disloyalty on Derek's part that he had dared to be first at the altar. Her refusal hurt him more than he allowed any one to suspect; and confirmed his secret sense of a breach between them for some cause or causes unknown.

In September he was passed for light duty: and the commission he had more than once refused, was accepted at last. But before his course of training was completed, fresh signs of lung trouble shelved him again: whereupon Gabrielle prescribed the South coast and shepherded him into a charming house at Parkstone-on-Sea.

Van, meanwhile, saw little or nothing of them — not by chance, but by design. His genuine passion, slowly roused, was slow to subside. Worse still, it threatened to frustrate his 'business proposition,' now more than ever due to Avonleigh as a set-off against the formidable cost of his philanthropic enterprise. Increasingly his heart leaned toward singleness and freedom, and Léonie. The deuce of it was that this particular duty could not be conveniently shifted on to other shoulders . . .

And, in December, all lesser matters were dwarfed by the news that Lord Avonleigh's health had given way and he was sailing almost at once —

Shortly after Christmas he arrived — a ghost of his former self. At Avonleigh House his entire family — anxious and subdued — assembled to welcome him; and his reception of the new daughter made unwitting amends for the polite formality of his wife's attitude. Gabrielle charmed him at sight; and he won her heart as much by his likeness to Derek as by his sincere pride and pleasure in having a blood-link with France.

Greetings over, medical science could no longer be denied; and specialists came and ministered to him. Their verdicts were as conflicting as their nostrums were unpalatable; and he was sufficiently himself to be obstructive and sceptical as of old. On one point they were unanimous. If he wished to give himself a sporting chance, he must consent to spend the next three

months on the Riviera or the Southwest coast. Four years of Bombay had impoverished his power of resisting the chills and damps of his beloved Island. Avonleigh in the spring — should all go well.

Against that unwelcome verdict he rebelled with an acute irritation bred of sheer illness and craving for home. Cannes and Torquay were vetoed out of hand. Branksome Park was a happier inspiration; since it would keep him near Derek and his wife. But — the choice of an abode! Between the idiosyncrasies of Evan and Esther, Marion had need of all her diplomacy, all her resource. To Evan, hotels and furnished houses were anathema. Living with other people's belongings — he whimsically complained — made him feel like a shipwrecked mariner rigged out in some one else's clothes. But in the end he accepted the lesser evil — a 'desirable residence' within easy reach of the sea; and directly after Christmas, he left London — scarcely yet recovered from its epidemic of resignations and counter-resignations, that were rumoured to have saved the country from drifting into an untimely peace.

Van — shocked and upset at the change in him — was yet secretly relieved at his departure. Their meeting had been friendly, but formal; marked by a studious avoidance of awkward topics that did not tend to put an erring son — used to very different treatment — at his ease. He felt curiously nonplussed, as never before, by the ironic spirit that looked out of Lord Avonleigh's handsome, hawk-like eyes.

Alone again, he breathed more freely; though the ache of anxiety worried him, and a more acute ache of repentance than he had suffered yet. If his father would only give him a chance, the thing might get itself said —

Very soon the chance arrived in the form of a note inviting him down for the week-end.

"I feel stronger now," his father wrote, "and there are matters to talk of which I prefer not to discuss by letter. Difficult subjects are best tackled face to face."

Needless to say, Van disagreed vehemently with that last. But refusal was out of the question; and he went down on the

Saturday—shirking it badly; thankful, at least, that his mother was on the spot.

He found Lord Avonleigh looking many degrees more like himself; full of keen speculation as to the hopes, the risks, and complications of the New Order—Unionist in essence, but not in leadership. “The man has driving power” he conceded to his old arch-enemy. “Like Jehu, he driveth furiously. The critical question is—in what direction? At least we shall get a move on all round. But I am not sanguine enough to hope that we may see your *friend* Schonberg relieved of his naturalization mask and treated, firmly but politely, as an enemy subject.”

They were sitting together over their wine; and, in speaking, he transfixes Van with a look that set the blood tingling under his skin. If only that precious interview were over and done with!

But business in the evening was taboo: and next morning he followed his father into the study, feeling unpleasantly like a schoolboy with a possible caning in prospect.

Lord Avonleigh took the swivel seat before his desk and consigned Van to an armchair facing him. After a few brief questions about the Hospital—now reduced to a score of convalescents in one wing—he went straight to the point that for months had pricked him like a thorn under the flesh.

“I suppose you are aware, Van,” he said in a level tone, “that Schonberg wrote me a very exhaustive letter, when he sent in his modest account of expenditure and—accommodations?”

Van drew in his lips and stared hard at the residential pattern of the hearthrug.

“I’ve—wondered about it. He threatened as much.”

“Threatened?”

“It almost amounted to that.” Van hesitated. Speech was difficult. But a keen desire to reveal the connection between that letter and his own decision unloosed his tongue.

Lord Avonleigh’s approval was evident, though restrained. He seemed to be keeping a tight hold on himself this morning.

“I’m glad you held your own with the fellow. He took full

advantage of his opportunity to strike back, in true German fashion. I never mentioned the letter. It was a difficult matter to write about, since you saw fit to leave me completely in the dark. I preferred to wait — to reserve my judgment. Now — if you will read it, you can, perhaps, enlighten me —”

Van was twisting the cord of his eyeglass.

“Is it really necessary? Why rake up the beastly thing — after all this time?”

Lord Avonleigh sighed. “Unhappily time does not affect the fundamentals of this affair. I am sorry to trouble you; but you may be able to relieve my mind.”

“Has he blackened my face — regardless?”

“He is a past-master at insinuation.”

No evading it. Without a word, Van took the hateful sheet, leaned an elbow on the arm of his chair and shaded his eyes while he read.

Had his father designed to punish him unmercifully, he could scarce have imposed on him a harsher ordeal. Even through the sheltering hand, Van could feel the intentness of his keen glance, the suspended attitude of his just, austere mind. All the old indulgence seemed to have been burnt away. . . .

He looked up at last; tried to meet the silent question in his father’s eyes — and incontinently failed.

“How much of this — masterpiece,” he asked, “do you believe?”

“How much of it,” countered Lord Avonleigh, “is approximately true?”

“Isn’t it sheer waste of breath trying to defend myself?” Van flung out, with unaccustomed bitterness. “Haven’t you . . . months ago weighed me in the balance . . . and all the rest of it? If I assert that he has skilfully maligned me, would you — accept my bare word?”

Lord Avonleigh’s thin hand grasped the arm of his chair.

“I believe that, in these unhappy circumstances, you would not wilfully — distort facts.”

“Good God!”

Van changed colour as if he had been struck. His own pain

blinded him to the pain he had inflicted; and a shadow flitted across Lord Avonleigh's face.

"We seem constrained to hurt one another," he said in a gentler tone. "But whose fault is it if my faith in you is shaken?"

It was a question Van could not trust himself to answer; and, after a brief silence, Lord Avonleigh went on: "I have had time, since May, to take a long look backward; and — it has shown me too clearly how consistently you have played for mere popularity at home and abroad. You have been willing to deceive your mother — and me, within gentlemanly limits, sooner than let us see you in an unflattering light. Was it worth while, Van, even on the lowest computation?"

Van's answer was barely audible. The pattern of the hearth-rug was weaving itself automatically into his brain.

And again Lord Avonleigh's measured voice went on: "I have wondered, in view of your remarkable capacity for spending money, how you managed to come through Oxford with a pretty clear balance sheet."

"Karl," Van answered, without looking up; and Lord Avonleigh's lips twitched under his moustache.

"The Schonberg family has done you yeoman service. And now — what have you to say — about that letter?"

This time Van looked up, a faint suggestion of challenge in his glance. "I hope you will at least do me the honour to believe that these abominable implications are untrue."

"Altogether —?"

Van flinched: but the pitiless scrutiny of his father's eyes wrung the truth from him.

"In point of fact — not altogether. I had no intention — He seemed so thoroughly my friend. But — looking back — I'm afraid in some ways I was . . . confoundedly careless . . . if *that's* a cardinal sin."

"In certain circumstances, it amounts to one. And naturally — being a good deal indebted —?"

"Oh, of course one preferred to avoid needless friction. And — I couldn't see that he was up to any harm."

"But now that you are less indebted, perhaps your eyesight has improved? If so, you might dispense with that superfluous monocle."

Van, who was fingering it absently, could not repress a start. With an impatient movement he jerked the glass sharply against a corner of the desk and cracked it right across.

"Excellent! Don't waste good money on another," said his father drily — and reverted to his theme. "Perhaps you see — now — that I was right in distrusting the man — *and* his nation? He is as clever as Germans are made; and there are too many others a good deal indebted! But you knew my opinions — my prejudice, if you will. And probably others warned you. George —?"

"Yes. And — well — Derek and I had a bit of a jar about it."

Lord Avonleigh drew an audible breath. "I wondered — when that was coming."

"You mean — *if* —?"

"Yes — if —" His father spared him nothing. "But I am glad you have admitted it. I told Derek a good deal that you might have found worth considering — had you cared to hear."

"It's nothing but *Dirks* with you now." Van's look and tone were distinctly aggrieved. "I expect you've been wishing — since this cursed affair — that *he* was — in my shoes."

Lord Avonleigh was silent a moment; then he looked straight at his first-born. "I can't deny that the thought — has occurred to me."

At that, Van sprang to his feet.

"Damn it all! I've not committed forgery. And — I *am* — your son! But if you think I'm unfit — if you want to break the entail — I won't raise any objections."

Again Lord Avonleigh's hand closed on his chair. Sensations within warned him that he was overtaxing his strength.

"My dear boy, you are talking at random," he said, not unkindly. "I would not dream of dishonouring you in the eyes of the world."

"But if I'm dishonoured — in *your* eyes — what matter —?"

His father's look reminded him of Derek.

"Keep on the rails, Van. You may feel like that — now. In a cooler moment you would realize that the world counts — for both of us; your own world — the tenants — the family — Mother —"

At that word, Van's very mixed impulse of renunciation shrivelled like a leaf at the first touch of autumn.

"All the same — if you think I'm unfit," he repeated. For the implication rankled.

"We needn't go over all that afresh."

But Van was growing desperate. "Will you *never* — let bygones be bygones — and start fair again?"

Lord Avonleigh frowned. "The matter is not so simple. There are wounds — a lifetime cannot heal." Something checked him. He seemed to breathe with difficulty; and physical weakness always made him impatient. "Sit down — sit down. I'm not strong enough for a scene."

His changed aspect, and the drawn lines about his mouth, caught at Van's heart; extinguished for a moment all thought of self.

"*Father!*" he exclaimed — compressing into that supreme word all his carefully framed expressions of regret.

Lord Avonleigh grasped his outflung hand. For a few moments they looked straight at one another; but no word was spoken. And Van knew that nothing more would be said from that hour.

When the tension had subsided, his father again motioned him to sit down.

"We still have a trifle of business to see about," he explained in his normal voice.

"Are you sure — you're fit?"

"Of course I am. It needn't take long. And with things — so uncertain, one can't let chances slide. The fact is — I want Derek to have Trevanyon, as a permanency; for himself and his heirs after him. And — your consent is necessary to the transaction."

Van's passing pang had no connection with Trevanyon.

"It's a capital notion," he agreed warmly. "It would give the place a better chance. I should say Dirks is cut out for land-owning."

"I am glad we agree on that point," said Lord Avonleigh, surprised at the generous tribute. He did not know that, in his own fashion, Van was salving his conscience for those unfair reservations made to his mother.

"Has Dirks any idea?"

"He knows I wish it."

"Queer — he's never said a word."

Lord Avonleigh's smile inflicted a fresh pin-prick of jealousy. "He probably thought I should prefer to tell you myself. Are you going over to see him?"

"I thought of it. And now — I'd like to offer congrats — to assure him personally that Barkis is willing."

He left the study ten minutes later, in a very mixed frame of mind; avoided the drawing-room, where his mother would certainly be awaiting him, and hurried out of the house.

But though he walked at a swinging pace through the pine-woods to the green open sweep of the golf links, he did not cross over to the black and white house on the hill where Derek and Gabrielle had made their first real home. For, down near the marshes, he spied two figures walking very close together. No mistaking them. Gabrielle carried a basket and stooped at intervals; evidently collecting something. Once they paused and had a lively altercation. Gabrielle seemed to be asserting her dignity with a lift of her head that Van's heart knew too well. But Derek had the best of it: and they went on again as before.

For about three minutes Van looked after them, feeling rebellious and miserable. Then he turned on his heel and went back the way he had come. He considered he had endured enough that morning. Not that he actively grudged Derek his good fortune; but more than once he had caught a look in Gabrielle's eyes when they rested on her husband — not merely loving, but glorying in him — that made Van feel 'bad all over.' And the ache about his father went deeper still . . .

He prolonged his walk till near lunch time; and on his return ran into his mother, restlessly pacing the lawn in her long squirrel coat with a lacelike wrap over her head.

"Oh, my dear"—her fingers closed on his forearm. "Why did you stay so long? We've had a wretched morning. Father has been quite upset. He had to lie down. And then — Aunt Marion makes unkind insinuations about you."

Van frowned. "I'm afraid I was — more or less — responsible. But Aunt Marion's got a tongue like a razor — *not* patent safety! Is she a fixture? I wonder you can put up with her."

"I wouldn't — if I was stronger," sighed Lady Avonleigh. As a matter of fact she found Marion Blount invaluable when there were difficult or unpleasant things to be done. But the poisoned arrow of jealousy had pricked her placid heart. "Because I *had* to let her take my place in India, she seems to imagine she can stay here always and come between us at every turn. Of course Father — is difficult. And things are — a strain —" She pressed a morsel of lace and lawn against her shaking lips, and went on in a lower tone: "Oh, Van, I'm miserable here. Father doesn't really seem to get better and I hate this place. I shall break down if it goes on much longer. I miss London. And most of all — I miss you. Do come again soon, dear."

Van shook his head. "I'm afraid you won't see me here very often."

"Then I shall go back to London," she announced with desperate courage. "I *must* see you sometimes. I was counting on this morning; and you've wasted it all with *Derek*."

Annoyance lurked in the mere stress on his name; and it impelled Van to say: "You're really not fair on Dirks, Mother. And I haven't been near him."

"Then — why —?"

"Oh, nothing. I just felt I must have a walk."

But love quickened her senses where he was concerned, and she had seen the shadow in his eyes. "Dear," she ventured

pressing his arm, "did you have a difficult time with Father? Was he — down on you?"

"Fair to mod.," Van answered lightly. "After all — I let him in for the deuce of a bother over Avonleigh."

"That's your generous way of putting it. You did an excellent bit of war work, when your hands were quite full enough. If you *did* think better of Mr. Schonberg than he deserved, it's all to your credit — in *my* eyes. And if only Derek had not interfered —"

Van frowned and looked uncomfortable.

"He didn't interfere. You seem to have got a maggot in your head about Dirks."

But his belated chainpionship was unavailing.

"Just like you, dear, to stand up for him. But he's a great deal too opinionated — Blount all through. As for Father — I can't make him out. *You* were always his favourite. And now he worries you about this wretched business, when it's all over. So unkind — so unjust —!"

"That's enough, Mother." Van's tone was almost peremptory. "Kindness has never been one of Father's strong points; but I don't think he knows how to be — unjust."

In the circumstances it was magnanimous; the sincerest tribute he had paid in all the days of his life.

CHAPTER II

*A mother and a mistress and a dear,
A guide, a goddess and a sovereign.*

SHAKESPEARE

ON a mild afternoon of January, cloudless and very still, Derek sat alone on the confines of a pine patch overlooked by the all-devouring axe. The height and majesty of its individual trees dowered the little wood with a dignity, out of all proportion to its size. From the wide main road they trooped in close formation, to the rim of the orange-tawny cliff, straggling as they neared it; the less stalwart bowed eastward by the buffetings of autumnal gales. One of them lay prone near the crumbling edge; and against its upturned roots Derek rested his head and shoulders.

His half-recumbent figure was still as the trees around, as the opalescent sea that lisped 'hush-hush' on the sand two hundred feet below. Only ascending whiffs of smoke revealed that he was not asleep. A rusty-haired Aberdeen lay curled up close against him, nose to tail. His name was Socrates. He was a wedding present from Mark; and, awake or asleep, Derek found him excellent company. At the moment, like his master, he was hovering between the two, in a blissful borderland peopled with bones and cats.

Derek's borderland was filled enchantingly with the looks and tendernesses and humours of the wife, who became more deeply and sacredly dear to him with every month of possession. He was just pleasantly aware of the outer world as a fitting background for her gracious figure. Heart, mind, and body were steeped in content. . . .

Truly a wonderful state of life — marriage; the real thing with the real woman! He who had been so sceptical, so reluc-

tant to open the inner doors of his being, now felt himself blest beyond his deserts. His slow, tenacious nature absorbed happiness slowly; and it went the deeper with him in consequence. Even after five months of marriage he still, at times, had the lover's need to get away and be alone with the wonder of it all. . . .

Inevitably, at moments, some mood or phrase would recall that earlier union; such a travesty of the real thing, as he knew it now, that it seemed a prostitution of language to use the same word for both. In Lois — unloved, yet tenderly cherished — he had found mere woman. In Gabrielle, he found true woman — and something more; something that could live on the level of his upward-reaching thoughts; something as essential to him as dew to grass and sunshine to opening buds. Every shy step he took into the recesses of her character was an adventure rich in discovery to a lover of little knowledge, but no longer of little faith. Such fine adjustments of the Latin and Saxon elements in her! So light, yet unerring, her touch on the double chord in a man's nature — the eternal dissonance of flesh and spirit that is the crux of marriage. Never had he known any one less restless and more alive. Her very repose seemed quick with vitality; her reserve warmed with flashes of heavenly frankness — all the doors of her being flung wide for him to enter in. A woman one could love with mind as well as heart; and Derek had need of the dual allegiance to hold him fast. More than all she held him by the mother element in her love, that permeated and hallowed their whole relation. Starved of it all his days — he had found, at last, as by a miracle, mother and wife in one. That Fate, after ceaseless buffetings, should have made such royal amends —!

Stripped of superstitious trappings he saw her, now — materialist in the grain: one that trafficked in externals; all that was most vital in man eternally eluding her grasp. She could rend, she could batter the frail human envelope. Inner fatality there was none. And that brave assurance was something more vital than the lover's innate sense of immunity. It went deeper. It would endure.

The peace and stillness of this midwinter day, on a landlocked coast, were mirrored within him. Yet eternally, behind everything, lurked the waiting shadow of the War: its awful insistent magnetism drawing him, drawing him away from his new-found blessedness, from the alchemic experience that had indeed transmuted iron to gold. . . .

In the midst of his blissful dreaming — thought melting into sensation, and sensation running back into the mould of thought — he fell to wondering — Had a man the right to lose himself in personal happiness while the blood of his brothers was being spilled like water and the nations of earth were locked in a death-grapple on the far side of that smiling sea? Did it unstring him for battle or strengthen the sinews of his spirit?

A little of both, he admitted honestly. Much depended on the mood. It could and did make some things harder to bear. It could not and did not affect the irresistible inner compulsion — duty, love of country, name it how you will; all the mysterious forces that lie behind the word ‘must’ — the deep conviction that only on the field of battle, doing his microscopic utmost, could a man, in these great days, be at peace with his soul. It could not silence the call of the dead — ‘Come out and fill the gaps’ — or of the Greater Comradship that springs from striving and suffering in common. Whenever he heard of a success or failure in the region where his regiment must be, one thought eclipsed all others — “And *I* not out there sharing it all!”

Yet — being humanly inconsistent — he was thankful enough for the respite from parting, for the blessed spell of love and quiet life, in this peaceful oasis between the pines and the sea; and — not least — for the chance to see more of his father before the Inexorable claimed him again — if it ever did.

They had been lunching to-day at Barford Towers; but had resisted an invitation to stay on for tea. Lord Avonleigh seldom graced the tea-tray; and their own fireside, these winter evenings, was Elysium.

Derek and Socrates — briefly ‘Socks’ — were waiting for

Gabrielle who was returning some books to a friend; a serious reader, like herself. Derek, having nothing to say to the friend's husband, had voted for Socrates and the pines and the sea. He had spent most of the morning in his father's company—the best he knew. They had talked much of Trevanyon; of hopes and schemes for that Ultima Thule—'after the War.' The story of Gabrielle and her marriage portion had moved Lord Avonleigh to atone, in part, for Burlton's defection by settling a small dowry on her himself; and nothing could more firmly have cemented the personal link between them than this gracious and generous act.

Of the painful scene with Van, a week ago, Lord Avonleigh had told Derek nothing beyond the fact of his brother's willingness and the generous compliment with which it had been confirmed. Derek, genuinely moved, wondered why Van had not come over to see them; and Lord Avonleigh wondered also, without giving him away. It simply looked like incapacity to run straight, even in the smallest matters—which was hard on Van.

Since that Sunday, Lord Avonleigh had been distinctly less well: and Derek, the married man, could no longer blind himself to the truth that his mother was failing her husband lamentably in these difficult days; had done so—he shrewdly suspected—at every turn. For him, that tragic fact overshadowed the pain and bewilderment of her changed attitude to himself. He was becoming blunted to it now. Ignorant of the true cause, he could only suppose she was jealous for Van because he and his father had become close friends. The pettiness, the injustice of it galled him and held him proudly aloof. He, who had enthroned her in his boy's heart as more than woman, saw her now, with his man's eyes, as less than woman; since she lacked the supreme attribute—power to hold the hearts of her men. She simply let them slip out of her idle graceful fingers. Strange and sad to realize how completely his old feeling for her had shrivelled and died from sheer lack of nourishment. No link left between them but the physical accident of birth; and Derek had discovered—with something

of a shock — how slight a thing it is without the more vital links of heart and brain, of understanding and trust. They had simply lost each other: and the pity of it was that the fact seemed to have so little significance for either of them —

His father, thank Heaven, had Aunt Marion, or his plight would be tragic indeed. And he himself — thrice blest — had Gabrielle —!

Having let his pipe go out, he pocketed it and grew drowsy, from a blessed sense of well-being. So he failed to hear light footsteps approaching or to notice that Socrates sat up and cocked a wise head. His first intimation was a pair of ungloved hands laid on his shoulders from behind. With a start he came to himself, captured those soft cool hands and pressed them to his lips.

Gabrielle, leaning over the upturned roots, laid her head against his.

"Lazy villain! Have you been fast asleep catching your death?"

"Not quite. I've been absorbing the sun and the sea and a few other things — very good for my digestion!"

"But it's getting late. You *ought* to have been moving about. Come along home, darling. And we'll march double quick to work up a glow!"

Obedient in trifles, he rose reluctantly and squared his shoulders. The change in his whole aspect was as notable as the change from hospital blue to the heather-brown Norfolk coat of freedom. Gabrielle had also been translated from blue to brown. Her sables were a gift from Lord Avonleigh; and her charming face, framed in fur, and the soft cloud of her hair, looked years younger than on that June day of blessed memory.

Side by side they stood awhile, watching the path of the sun upon the sea — a milky way of radiance, changing, widening to a shower of golden leaves. Here a handful, there a handful, flickered and danced; till a last least sparkle gleamed where a wavelet curled and perished in foam.

Gabrielle slipped a hand into his and he pressed it hard. In

few respects were they more profoundly one than in their deep personal love of Nature.

"She being Spirit in her clods,
Footway to the God of Gods,"

Gabrielle quoted softly from the noble poem that enshrined her creed.

Derek nodded — and they turned homeward; the ungainly Socrates snouting among the pine needles for new and alluring smells; Gabrielle treading them with elastic step, health and happiness in every line and in the lift of her small head crowned with a cunningly folded device of green velvet and fur.

If they talked little, they were not the less content. Between married lovers the body, grown eloquent, has a speech of its own. It is enough for one that the other is there. Simply by their presence they converse. For the alchemic quality of true union is no mere romantic fancy, but a physiological fact. In the light of this wonderful new knowledge, Gabrielle perceived, with dismay, how nearly her discreet plans had precipitated her into a state of life that would doubtfully have enriched Van and have left her poor indeed!

In moments of fullest recognition it came over her that the debt she owed her stray foundling was greater than mortal woman could pay.

CHAPTER III

'Our deeds are fitters that we forge ourselves.'

'Ay, true, my lord. But 'tis the world that brings the iron.'

SHAKESPEARE

HALF an hour later, Gabrielle sat alone in her drawing-room beside a blazing log fire that fitfully illumined her golden brown curtains, the dull red and blue of her Persian carpet, and her rare collection of brasses and ivories, contributed from all parts of the world. These, and the inlaid bookcase that enshrined her favourites, set the impress of her personality on the room.

On a low table, near the fire, silver tea-things gleamed; but Gabrielle had deserted her seat for a floor-cushion close to Derek's chair. They had been reading together a long, happy letter from Sheila, bidding two prospective godparents to the christening of Mark's son. Derek had just gone out to answer a telephone call; and she had opened a letter from Randchester. She was studying it now; her brows contracted, all the radiance gone from her face.

When the door opened, she started and looked up.

"Oh, Derek!" With a peremptory gesture she motioned him to his chair. "It's Dad — Mr. Schonberg — Read it."

Resting an elbow on his knee, she held the sheet towards him; and together they read the last phase of that fatal conjunction, which a stranger Gabrielle had hinted at to a stranger Derek more than four years ago.

My DARLING [wrote Burlton], —

I have just returned from Schonberg's and — I have broken with him *for good*. I am going to sell out; and when that is done, there will be no more Burltons. The fellow had the cheek to suggest that the firm (*his* firm, mind you) should not be deprived of a name so respected throughout the Kingdom. He thought I would take the

proposal as a mark of esteem. He found himself mistaken for once, thank God.

Are you surprised, Gay, that I am writing about him like this? They say confession is good for the soul; and to you — who have forgiven me so much — I confess that all these years I have been blind, and as obstinate as a mule. When I wasn't quite so blind, I hugged my obstinacy. Sooner than admit I was wrong, I quarrelled with poor Jacko, and lost my temper all round. The truth was I couldn't — as a firm — afford to break with Schonberg. He took a good holding when we changed the partnership into a company and he made things move. But all the while, cautiously and skilfully, he was playing the German game — that nearly throttled us all before the War. I can see clearly enough, now, that five pounds' worth of naturalization is no charm for making silk purses out of sows' ears. It merely gave the devil his opportunity; and the devil has made the most of it. But it's too late, alas, to save the old firm. Nothing can ease my heart or my conscience about that. It's nearly a hundred years since my grandfather started his little venture; and to me the firm has been a kind of religion. I honestly thought the Schonberg alliance was as good a day's work as any Burlton had ever done; and what I have been through this last year — half suspecting things and trying to think I was mistaken — no one will ever know. Some day, when it is all ancient history, we will talk of it. To-day I can only give you a rough idea of the doings that have led me to take the saddest step of my life.

The fact is, as I said, Schonberg must have been working for years, to get the lion's share of votes on the Board, in other words, command of the Capital. It is not easy to make things clear to you, my dear; but you have heard me talk of shares being 'bear-ed' on 'Change for purposes of speculation. Well — when I found this dirty business going on, of course it worried me badly. But I could not get at the source of it. No more could Schonberg, which might have made me suspect he was involved. I'm pretty well sure of it now. In fact the truth has at last been knocked into my thick head that, for all practical purposes — shareholders, capital, and so forth — Burltons is actually more German than British, though most of the gentlemen concerned are British subjects — so called! I confess that would not have bothered me much a few years ago. But we have stepped into another world since then. And some trouble here recently (which I could not overlook) has brought matters to a head. You would not understand the details. It was

a matter of export leakage — metal pipes and so forth. Neutral agents, of course; and the whole thing has been so cleverly done that it is difficult to take action. Schonberg very zealous as usual. But for once he has not been able to throw dust in my eyes. Some fishy details, that came to hand this morning, fairly put my blood up and I spoke to him as I have never spoken in all my days. Thank God, it's over —

The next word trailed off into a meaningless scrawl; and a few lines from Mrs. Lester completed John Burlton's tragic story.

Your dear stepfather [she wrote] has had an apoplectic seizure. It happened during an interview with Mr. Schonberg. They had quarrelled yesterday, as John's letter explains, and while he was writing, Mr. Schonberg was announced. Of course I left the study. And exactly what passed between them, I fear none of us will ever know. We gathered from Mr. Schonberg that it was a stormy interview; and I don't doubt it was all *his* doing. At first we feared everything was over, which would perhaps have been more merciful. Don't think of coming up, dear. It is too cruelly sad. He would not know you and none of us can do anything. Karl is here —

There was a little more; but for Gabrielle it had all become a tremulous blur; and, with a shivering sob, she hid her face against Derek's shoulder.

Dumb in the presence of tragedy, he could only gather her close and press her head against his own.

"Courage, beloved," he whispered, at last; and for answer he had her lips and shining eyes.

Then she sat upright and brushed away her tears. "I'll be brave now," she said with a pathetic smile. "But oh, I wish — he was gone. He'll wish it too — when he realizes —"

For nearly an hour they sat there, in the firelight, talking quietly, fitfully, of it all. In some strange way it eased Gabrielle's pain to wander back into old times; into the spacious days of childhood, when the world was made new every morning for Jacko and herself; to recall the generosities and loyalties of

the limited, lovable man whose limitations had cost him all he valued on earth. And Derek unobtrusively encouraged her; thankful she had found a passing anodyne; eager, on his own account, to follow her along any bypath of memory that enlarged his view of her.

Only when Schonberg's ominous shadow loomed on the horizon, pain stabbed her afresh: and sitting up suddenly, she clenched her small hands.

"*Mon Dieu*, but I want to *murder* him!"

It was no mere impotent cry of the heart. It was ingrained Latin hatred of '*les sales Boches*' afame in her individual soul.

Derek loved these flashes of racial spirit in her; and his hand closed over hers that had descended vehemently on his knee.

"It would give me the utmost satisfaction," he said gravely, "to do the business for you myself. This War has reawakened, in thousands of us, the old virile demand for retribution. The milk and water methods of civilized justice hardly meet the case."

She nodded, half smiling, but the inner fire was not quenched.

"We can do *nothing*! And he will flourish — flourish!" she went on, the same passionate protest in her low tone. "He is Germany incarnate. And to think there are scores of our own people who can *still* make excuses, still speak and think of Germany without loathing! Hatred is for equals. Can they possibly sink to lower depths? Yet, even if we win, shall we ever be allowed to smite them hip and thigh?"

"I have my doubts," said Derek, knowing his own countrymen — the chivalry on one side of the shield, the apathy, tinged with self-interest, on the other.

She sighed. For the moment her wrath was spent. "Yet Utopians can still persuade themselves that this War is to end war! *Nous verrons*! Are we seriously going to beat our aeroplanes into ploughshares and our battleships into fire-irons?"

Derek shook his head. "On the contrary — I fancy we are in for a fresh cycle of war. Karl and I came to that conclusion last time we talked of things."

The mention of Karl reminded him of Mrs. Lester's remark.

"Wonder what took him to Randchester. Poor chap! There's no getting quit of his father. I expect I shall hear soon."

He heard next morning: a brief note, merely announcing Karl's imminent arrival on the scene.

There's been the devil to pay up here [he wrote]. I am coming down at once to see Lord Avonleigh. I can't write about it all. But I should be awfully glad of a talk with you. Please give Mrs. Blount my deepest, sincerest sympathy; and if she would really rather not see me, perhaps you and I can meet elsewhere.

Derek handed the open sheet to Gabrielle, who was making tea. "It's for you to answer that. I believe I told you long ago that Karl was the goods."

Gabrielle glanced through it. When she looked up, tears stood in her eyes.

"Wire, darling," she said. "Ask him to come—and stay the night."

CHAPTER IV

It is a force of man's own creating that plays the most active part in what it pleases us to term 'fatality.'

MAETERLINCK

It was a peremptory wire from Schonberg that had taken Karl to Randchester at the moment of all others when he would rather have been elsewhere. He had, in fact, not been home since the summer. If he could not bring himself to denounce his father, he could at least keep clear of him.

But the telegram had been imperative: "Come up here at once. A matter of business."

The last had made him feel curious and uneasy. Schonberg had spent most of the autumn at Randchester; and, for some time, Karl had been dreading developments. Driving from the station, through slush and deep drifts of soiled snow, he felt suddenly impelled to stop at Warton Grange. From a brief talk with Burlton he might glean some idea of how the land lay. From his father he would glean only such items as it suited that gentleman to reveal.

But the parlourmaid informed him that Mr. Burlton was engaged — with Mr. Schonberg.

"Tell him I called," said Karl; and drove on to 'Freischütz' (now Freelands), where he learnt from the good Anna that there was 'something in the wind.' Adolf was in a strange humour. But he had told her nothing. He never did. She simply stated the fact, without a hint of reproach; and Karl, increasingly uneasy, remarked that he would await his father in the study.

It was nearly nine months since he had last set foot in that stuffy, unlovely room that was as redolent of Schonberg's personality as of his strong tobacco. Its shabbiness and stuffiness embalmed memories that seemed silently to rebuke him for his

attitude of detachment and tacit distrust: and to-day, it vividly recalled the occasion on which he had spoken of Van's offer — his hidden eagerness hampered by galling doubt, where there should have been mutual confidence and good faith.

The essential Karl had travelled a long way since then: yet here — to the least detail — everything looked eternally the same. The faded red curtains were many degrees more faded. Schonberg had a queer sentimental kink about his personal belongings, and he would not have them changed. There were slits in the bamboo blind and the great leather chair and hearthrug looked shabbier than ever. The doleful castor-oil plant had given place to a hardly less doleful fern; and now, as then, the only gleam of freshness in the room was contributed by the vase of chrysanthemums under his mother's portrait.

"They, at any rate, have been changed!" he reflected with a flicker of humour.

But the flicker was short-lived. Instinctively he knew himself in touch with tragedy; with the full force of his father's secretly inimical personality. And all his own deep-seated antagonism sprang to arms. What the deuce was this mysterious matter of business . . . ?

His father's deliberate step sounded in the hall; and when the door opened, Karl had a glimpse of him before he knew himself not alone. His heavy face was set and stern; his lower lip thrust out; and the downward droop of the head made his whole aspect seem curiously unfamiliar. It was a mere impression, gone in a flash. The next moment he looked up and beheld his son standing on the hearthrug, his back to the fire.

Karl had been less than human could he have seen, unmoved, the transfiguration of his father's insensitive face. Nothing threatening now in the sudden lift of his lids.

"Zo! You are here. Goot."

Softly closing the door, he came forward and deposited a large hand on Karl's shoulder.

"I expegeted you earlier. You were delayed?"

"Yes. I got away as soon as I could," Karl answered in a contained voice. He felt uncomfortably conecious of some-

thing more than affection in his father's grasp; something possessive, compelling, from which he shrank in every fibre of his being.

Schonberg, whether aware or unaware, tightened his hold a moment; seemed to search his son's eyes for some glimmer of response; and failing to find it, let his hand fall heavily.

"If you had come sooner — it is pozzible —" He paused and lifted his big shoulders. "But — perhaps — no? If not now — later. It is Fate."

"*What is? Why talk in riddles?*" Karl flung out, goaded to impatience by the lurking sense of trouble in the air.

"I am speaging of myself and Burlton," Schonberg answered with more than his usual deliberation. "If you will be goot enough to sit down — and keep your temper — you shall hear what I haf to tell."

He set the example by subsiding into his desk chair and proceeding to fill the bowl of his long, drooping pipe. Karl watched the process a moment half fascinated, half repelled; then, deliberately avoiding the seat of inquisition that faced the window, he drew a stiff, high chair near the fire, set a foot upon the fender and lit a cigarette.

"Well?" he asked curtly.

"Well — only this — there is no Burltons any more."

Karl fairly jumped. "What the devil —?"

"Whether the defil, or not, is a matter of opinion," his father retorted, pressing down his tobacco with the formidable thumb that had been one of the terrors of Karl's childhood. "It is his own doing — his own dezision."

Karl looked sceptical. "In that case," he said, "the crux is — who . . . what drove him to a decision so disastrous, so utterly unlike himself?"

This time, the sudden lift of the eyelids was not pleasant to see.

"For answer to that riddle, you must consult — his Maker. I haf, shust now, left him — inzenzible. Apoplexy."

Again Karl started and drew in his lips. "A stroke? — Fatal?" he asked sharply.

His father shrugged. "I imachine — not. But bad enough to be very unpleasant — for him. When a man with a thig neg is over fifty, it becomes a danger to be obstinate without reason and to gwarrel hotly with his friends. Bad lug for Burlton. But for the firm —" another shrug. "We shall see. He has been leetle use laidly — and he knew it."

That was too much for Karl. "Good God!" he broke out. "How *can* you sit there discussing, in cold blood, the man you have worked with all these years — while he lies broken — dying, for aught you know — or care?"

"Prezizely." Schonberg muttered confidentially to the bowl of his pipe. "Nashural enough, I am sorry for Burlton. Too obstinate. But a goot fellow. For myself — I shed no grogodiles' tears. We tried to worg together. We cannot. So mush the worse — for him. It was yesterday — before I wired, that he decided to withdraw."

"Was *that* why you sent for me?" Karl asked abruptly. For a sudden thought stabbed him. Had he been dragged up all this way only that his father might avoid putting awkward details on paper?

"Yes — and no," was the enigmatic answer. Schonberg's strange eyes lingered a moment on the one being whom he genuinely loved, who stood only second, in his affection, to the great "Ueber Alles." "You are in a gweer mood to-day, Karl," he said, a kindlier note in his voice.

But Karl was adamant. "Well — of course —" he said, without looking round. "I'm anxious — upset. I have a human heart in my body. Go on. What did Burlton say? Now I've come — let's hear it all."

Leaning forward, an elbow on his knee he sat staring into the fire, while Schonberg vouchsafed him a skilfully bowdlerized version of the worm that turned. As regards the final scene, which had culminated in tragedy, he chose to be more enigmatic. It was entirely a matter between themselves: a matter on which he had not supposed Burlton would 'cut up rough.' But the English as a race were unreasonable and obstinate beyond belief — and Burlton was English to the marrow. He had worked

himself up into a fury over some preconceived notion. Argument was useless. And that 'verdammt Lester woman' had treated him — Schonberg — as if he were a murderer . . .

Clever as he was, it did not occur to him that Karl — whose good opinion he had particular reason to desire just then — was sufficiently his son to be a skilled hand at reading between the lines. As each fresh inkling of the truth flashed on him, his anger quickened to a fiercer flame that was steadily burning up all the old fear, the old reluctance, which had hitherto kept him from open collision with the father he had grown to hate. And the pain, the tragedy, at the back of it all, added fuel to the fire. Kindly John Burlton, stricken and helpless; Mrs. Lester — the boys — and above all — Gabrielle —!

The ferment of his own sensations distracted his mind, now and then, from what his father was saying, and suddenly — in the midst of one such passing aberration — he realized that he was being tactfully pressed to throw up Avonleigh and become a partner in the firm.

"Schonberg — and Son. What do you say, my boy?" There was genuine feeling in his father's tone. "A big privilege for one so young. But already you *haf* shown the goot stuff in you —"

At that, Karl — the cautious and contained — suddenly faced about with blazing eyes.

"I've *this* much good stuff in me that I have no hesitation whatever in declining the privilege; and if you expected any other answer, I can only say — you don't yet know your own son. I've noticed a lot these last years. And I've thought a lot. And I've kept my mouth shut. But this time you've overreached yourself. In plain English, you've robbed Burlton of his firm. You are morally responsible for the fact that he is lying there now, as good as dead — worse than dead, poor fellow! I tell you straight — I'm *not* proud of the connection. And I'm damned if I'll touch any concern of yours with a pair of tongs —"

In the heat of his anger, he rose and gripped the edge of the mantelpiece, and at the same moment, Schonberg brought his fist down upon the desk with a startling thud.

"*Stop that!*" he thundered, in a voice of mingled rage and pain. "Nefer has any man dared speak zo to me. And *you* — *Gott im Himmel!* — my Freda's flesh and blood —!"

He broke off with a queer, choking sound.

For once, the man behind the mental machine looked out of his pale eyes — not at his son, but at the portrait of his dead wife above the mantelpiece.

Karl — startled and shaken — looked in the same direction, as if for guidance in this critical, difficult hour. And she, who had been the one real link between them, gazed wistfully back at both — powerless to intervene.

There was a moment of tense silence. Then Karl said more gently: "It is *her* spirit in me that is always goading me to speak straight — to act straight . . . at whatever cost. And this affair about settles things. I shall take her name, and — join the Army."

Schonberg drew a long breath; and his eyes shifted slowly from the dead face to the living one.

"My boy, you will not do any such thing," he said in a repressed voice.

And Karl answered, without wavering: "I shall go straight from here to Lord Avonleigh — and explain —"

"That your respegted father is a sgoundrel — *hein?*" The question was almost a snarl.

"No — that I am keen to have an active hand in smashing Germany; to disclaim — as far as I can — my unwilling link with a country of liars and assassins."

The quiet of his tone contrasted strangely with the passion of a few minutes earlier. For the first time he saw his father's jaw drop. Queer blotches of pallor appeared on his face; and the hand that still rested on the desk was clenched so that the knuckles stood out through the thick white flesh.

"*Zo!* You are the pingk of patriotism — *hein!* Or is it perhaps — you cannot bear to see your so dear friend Dereg possessing — the woman you love?"

At that unsuspected thrust, Karl reddened furiously. And Schonberg nodded; watching him through narrowed eyes.

"*A-ach!* You imachined I did not know? My goot boy, I saw the beginning long ago, in your vagations. And since then, I haf seen — you do not run after women. *Zo!* I hated always that French girl. She went against me. But I had the better of it —" He chuckled, as at some satisfying thought. "Nefer-theless, if at first you had gonfided in me, you were in earnest —it might have been otherwise. It is pozzible. I could have arranched —"

"*You?*" Karl flung out with concentrated bitterness. "I lost any ghost of a chance that I might have had, simply through being — your son. You have been no blessing to me, Father. Nor I to you, perhaps. But, at least — you have others."

"Those!" Schonberg dismissed them with a snap of his thick finger and thumb. "Karl — you will *not* leaf me — you will *not* join this War —"

His voice hovered strangely between command and appeal, and, for a breathing space, Karl wavered. It was the hardest moment of his life.

"You yourself have made it a case of 'must,'" he said quietly. "And it is better — for us both — that the break should be final."

Then, while courage held, he swung round, picked up stick and cap, and walked to the door. He dared not attempt a word of farewell.

As he grasped the handle, he heard an uncertain sound behind him. It might have been a grunt of derision. It seemed more like a stifled groan. It was all he could do not to turn back. . . .

Two minutes later, he pulled the front door to, with a dull bang — and discovered that he was shaking in every limb.

Again, for a few seconds he hesitated; then sharply pulled himself together and went straight to Warton Grange.

In that house of sorrow, he was received as a brother and a son. There was little he could do for them all; but that little

he did. Neither he nor Mrs. Lester so much as mentioned his father's name. From there he wrote to Derek: and there, next morning, his heart was lifted in him by the telegram conveying Gabrielle's invitation to "come by all means and stay the night."

CHAPTER V

The fathers have eaten sour grapes; and the children's teeth are set on edge.
EZEKIEL, XVIII, 2

So Karl Schonberg came to the black and white House on the Hill with a strange mixture of dread and longing in his heart. The obstinate persistence of his love for Gabrielle implied no disloyalty to Derek. If a man plucked the moon out of heaven, he could not quarrel with devout worshippers less fortunate than himself. Moreover he, Karl, had the start of Derek by a good many years; and no true lover could un-love such as she.

The event had surprised him vastly; and the mystery of Van's eclipse had never been solved. But surprise had been tinged with relief. He could just endure the idea of Derek, for whom he cherished a half-puzzled admiration, and who was — at least, in a measure — worthy of his great good fortune. But on one point Karl felt arrogantly certain. No man living could give her quite the same fine flower of devotion that blossomed in his own constant soul. The graciousness of her invitation, at this tragical juncture, overwhelmed him. Only one thing he dreaded — to see the shadow of tragedy in her eyes —

He had left town very early, spent an hour with Lord Avonleigh and accepted a pressing invitation to stay on for lunch, though his heart tugged at his body to be gone.

Arrived in the stone-flagged garden, he found Derek alone. The fact that both men were deeply moved made them a trifle constrained; but the force of Derek's grasp atoned for his native inability to make the correct remark, however sincere.

"It's good to see you again," he said. "Come and have a look at our terrace. Gabrielle had to go out after lunch. But she won't be long."

Neither man guessed that her errand to an invalid neighbour

was a pious fiction. Karl, she felt sure, would have much to say that could not well be said in her presence: which was true. Yet he would scarce have been grateful to her, had he known.

Rounding the house, they came upon the miniature terrace with its stone balustrade, its oak settles and low deep hedge of golden yew. And beyond and around — the sea and the harbour and the billowing glade of the golf links, enriched with russet patches of bracken and walled in, along the ridge, by a belt of tall old pines. Here and there, a few red houses of the new-made rich asserted man's inalienable right to live, no matter how much the process may disfigure the face of earth. Within the harbour, the sea was like a mirror, framed in the foreshore and the Purbeck hills and the narrow belt of sand dunes, with its outcrop of toy bungalows; their angularities bitten sharply out of the shimmering sea. At the end of the point, more bungalows clustered picturesquely; their foreign air enhanced by the softness and the sunshine, and a group of weather-beaten pines, in Japaneseque isolation, between the terrace and the sea.

No visible intrusion of man marred the tender sweep of the hills, their seaward cliffs worn by the restless beat of waves. At the far end, one slim strip stood detached, as it were, a lone sentinel guarding the harbour and the bay beyond. A flood of pale sunlight, breaking through curded clouds, illumined all the sea. Dark on bright, the dunes and foreshore and the lone pines were graven like an etching; and inland, above the ridge, loomed a threatening bank of cloud — like war brooding in the heart of peace.

Karl's deep-seated sense of beauty and his very mixed emotions held him silent for a space. Then he let out a great sigh.

"What a ripping place! The contrast — after Randchester! I left it a foot deep in snow; and London's ankle deep in slush."

They sat down on the bench, outside the bay window, and Derek indicated the bank of cloud with his pipe.

"It's finding us out. I hope it won't be too bad — because of Father. Are you . . . chucking your job?"

"Yes — for khaki, under my mother's name. I may be called up any day now. And I'd sooner volunteer."

"Naturally. What did Father say to that?"

"He sincerely regrets the necessity; but he approves my decision. He was kindness itself. And he meant it all. I could see that. He showed more knowledge and appreciation of my work than — Van has done in all these years on the spot. I'd give my soul to stay and carry on for him, if things hadn't gone so beastly contrary all round. He has made a bigger impression on me, in two conversations, than half our mushroom notabilities that I've met dozens of times in Town."

Derek smiled thoughtfully, looking out to sea.

"How did you think him looking?"

Karl hesitated. "You want the truth?"

"Of course."

"Well — the change gave me quite a turn. Is there anything seriously wrong?"

"I'm afraid so. Dr. Farrar was down the other day. I asked him some straight questions; and he said, normally, Father ought to have a good chance. But he seems — broken up. The Bombay climate and the shock of that wretched affair last summer —"

He checked himself, remembering the malign influence at the back of that affair.

Karl frowned and reddened. "Don't mind me, old chap. I've been facing facts these few days; and they're about as ugly as they can be. Your father and . . . hers — the nearest to it she's ever had — and . . . at the back of it all . . . *mine!*" He sucked in his lips in the old fashion that used to annoy Van. His eyes looked hard and strained. "My God! Derek, life's a damned bitter business for some of us just now."

Derek said nothing. His sympathy went too deep: and Karl, by this time, understood his friend's odd silences.

"I couldn't help thinking this morning," he added, after a pause, "if *I'd* been blessed with a father like that —!"

"It's no such easy matter living up to him."

Karl jerked his head round. But Derek's eyes gave no sign.

"Well — I'd have a try at it, anyway. Has it ever even occurred to Van, I wonder? Or does he imagine he was born worthy —?"

"Not altogether his fault if he does. — Did you see him in Town? Does he mind about your going?"

Karl shrugged. "He took it rather as a personal grievance. I said, 'Why not come along too?' He said he had been thinking of it seriously. I left him thinking!"

Scepticism lurked in Karl's tone; and Derek gave him a quick look. "What's up? You're not chucking Van — at this time of day?"

"It's hardly a case of chucking. He just lets people slide through his fingers. Frankly, I've lost patience with him during the War. It's an acid test of character."

Derek did not answer at once. Then he said quietly: "Poor old Van! He was hard hit — all round, last year. Do you know — does he ever see Mr. Schonberg these days?"

"Not often, I think. My father doesn't squander time or energy on mere friendship; and he's had his hands full, up North. I don't believe he thought *that* worm would turn. Good God! It was a hell of a business! When he told me about Burlton, I saw red. And I let myself go — for the first time. Once I started, I didn't mince matters —"

He rose and paced the terrace, shaken by the memory of it all. Then, in broken phrases, he re-created that unforgettable half-hour — so far as he could bring himself to put it into words. For he coveted Derek's good opinion; and he wanted Gabrielle to know . . .

At last, flinging away his cigarette, he came to a standstill; hands thrust in pockets, his face working with suppressed emotion.

"I tell you, Derek, I hit the bull's-eye every time. In all my days, I've hardly seen him turn a hair. But — he *did* care for my mother; and, in his queer way, he cares for me. He went livid before I'd done. And the deuce of it was I found I had been hurting myself hardly less than him. It's a mysterious business, that link of the blood. Trips me up at every

turn. If I go out there, as a British officer, and — get done in, I shall deal him the hardest blow of his life. But what the devil is a man in my enviable position to do?"

"Go straight ahead, old man, and 'leave the boss to do the worrying,'" said Derek in his quietest voice; though Schonberg himself could scarcely have been more surprised at Karl's uncharacteristic outburst. "That was my pal Mick Sayers's motto. It made a woodsman of me. I back it to make a soldier of you. Consequences are not your affair. Your father must take his chance like — better men."

Karl let out a great breath. "Oh, I am going all right. But, at present, I feel more like tramping the country and preaching the gospel that victory in the field will be precious little use unless we couple it with drastic surgical operations over here. Men like Van and Burlton will always be a standing danger to this country, so long as we are fools enough to reckon a man's nationality by his place of residence instead of the blood in his veins —!"

At that point he stopped dead; and the change that came over him was not lost on Derek.

Unnoticed by either, Gabrielle had entered the drawing-room, and now she stood there, framed in the open window — a living picture, in her furs and velvet cap.

"You seem to be improving the shining hour!" she said, smiling on them both. "Isn't it a heavenly spot? Welcome!"

Leaning over the sill she stretched out her hand; and Karl held it hard, without a word.

Derek — who had risen and removed his pipe — stood watching them with friendly, speculative eyes. Not even to him had she spoken of Karl's confession on that moonlight night of May.

As for Karl himself, his quiet evening in the black and white house was one of those unobtrusive events, that have neither drama nor any outward trappings of emotion, yet crystallize in the memory and abide there when greater happenings have grown dim. Jarred all through by the pain and strain of the last two days, it healed his spirit simply to be in the room with

Gabrielle, to watch her movements and hear her voice. Though the whole world were at war, between these four walls there was peace that is born of understanding. After the bovine domesticity at Randchester and the obvious under-current of strain between Lord and Lady Avonleigh, the impression of a free unity between these two, and their implicit joy in each other, shone out like a clear and beautiful light.

Not that they were demonstrative: rather the reverse. It was a matter of atmosphere; and Karl was a sensitive subject. Derek, having had his innings, tacitly surrendered his wife to their guest, who — even while appreciating the arrangement — could not escape the characteristic thought: "I don't believe the dear devoted fellow *really* knows much about being in love. I would have given her an ardour of adoration of which he is simply incapable."

To every man his secret bread; and for Karl there was sustenance, of a sort, in the innate belief that, as a son, he would have been worthier of Van's father; as a husband — in devotion, at least — worthier of Derek's wife.

After dinner, she spoke to him of Burlton, very composedly, though tears gleamed in her eyes. He told her how he went over to the Grange, how Mrs. Lester had treated him as one of themselves, allowing him to help her in every possible way. And he thrilled unashamedly at her significant remark: "Aunt Alice is a dear good soul. I will never call her tepid or narrow again."

Then there was music; and they played together, while Derek, in his chair by the fire, contentedly smoked and browsed on the *Nineteenth Century*.

When she asked for the 'Serenade,' Karl shook his head. "Never again!"

Up went her brows in mute enquiry.

"I can't play that . . . as it should be played, any more." He paused and added scarcely above his breath: "A window *was* opened after all."

"Foolish! Such beautiful music!" She rebuked him with deliberate lightness.

He reddened under her praise. "For me it has one great merit," he said in the same low tone. "It — served its turn."

She shook her head decisively. "Not permitted," she said: and dashed into a little lively humouresque, just as Derek looked up to ask what was the hitch in the programme.

If he did not indulge in sentimental genuflections, he was sufficiently a lover to feel something in the air —

CHAPTER VI

Misfortune, like water, espouses the form of the vase that contains it.

MAETERLINCK

DEREK's fears for his father were not unfounded. Lord Avonleigh's health and spirits seemed to decline as the days grew colder; and the snow lay thick even on the cliffs by the sea. Since his return, there had crept into his soul an insidious weariness of life that had never found entrance there in all his days. It came partly from ill health, partly from reaction after years of responsible life and work at high pressure. Nor were matters improved by the ceaseless undercurrent of friction with his wife.

Van's visit had precipitated a crisis. She had lost control of herself — a rare event. She had accused him of harshness and injustice to his first-born, while herself meting out such flagrant injustice to Derek as threw any defection of his own into the shade. They had come nearer to an open quarrel than at any time in their decorously detached married life. She was frankly jealous of Derek, on Van's account, and secretly jealous of Marion, on her own. The dual grievance had become almost an obsession, and it was getting on his nerves. No use telling her so. She was entirely preoccupied with her own, that had been 'worn to shreds by this terrible War.' She missed London. She was woefully bored with Bournemouth. Her one ewe lamb of pleasure was a sight of Van. And now Evan had deprived her of that, because he could not forgive his own son for being taken in by a German. As if half the cleverest men in England had not been taken in by Germans. And would he kindly intimate to Marion that she was quite capable, with Mrs. Consbigh's assistance, of running her own house?

Though, in general, he let this kind of thing flow over him,

and kept the door of his lips, it was no such easy matter to keep the door of his thoughts; and the corrosive acid of a hidden bitterness did not quicken convalescence.

On this particular occasion, the requested intimation to Marion took a form altogether his own. There was no one in the world like Marion; but, for that very reason, he admitted it might be hard on Esther. If one could even remotely hope that she could rise to the task of caring for him . . .

But one could not remotely hope — therefore he compromised.

"Molly, my dear," he said to his sister next morning, when she came to talk 'War news' with him in the study, "you've been on duty an unconscionable time. How about taking a fortnight's leave?"

She started and gave him a keen look. "Esther —?"

His smile was tinged with bitterness. "Frankly — yes. I have been hoping it might work. But it's plain — you can't hit it off —"

"And *you* are to be sacrificed — to the disabilities of a couple of women!" Pain and anger vibrated in her tone. "You know well enough if I did go, you — or the doctor — would be wiring for me within forty-eight hours. I've been loyal, Evan; and I have kept my mouth shut about her. But frankly, if it's a case of removing one of us, I am prepared to insist it shall *not* be me. Better for her — and you — if she was on her back in a Home of Rest, instead of making this a home of *unrest* for every one. It's partly health, but it's chiefly four years of semi-detachment! The women who have developed war nerves are not those who have done the work, or paid the price, but those who — for lack of real work or pain — have reduced worrying to a fine art."

Lord Avonleigh worked his eyebrows, astonished, yet by no means angered, at her outburst. "I believe," said he, "your diagnosis is correct. Four years apart is too long — at our age. Stevenson has it that absence is a good influence in love, and keeps it bright; 'but if the feeling is more pedestrian' —!" He chuckled grimly — "Has English literature his match for the *mot juste*?"

Marion reduced her smile to its least dimensions. He was slipping away from the personal and the emotional, which always irked him. "For me, the *mot juste* this morning is — no surrender! She failed you when it was *her* you needed. Now it pleases her to reassert herself, when it is me you need at every turn. There! If I've done for myself — say so. Except under orders, from you, I don't budge."

Straightly she confronted him, standing on the hearthrug — a tall, virile figure. And, without a word, he looked back at her, sitting very erect in his chair by the fire. Each read, clear as print, the thoughts in the other's brain.

Then Marion said quietly: "That's all right. Esther, having made use of me, must now make the best of me." And, coming suddenly close to him, she caressed his thick iron-grey hair.

"You always *were* obstinate, Molly," he said, looking up at her, gravely content.

"Every man in his time has need to thank his faults," she retorted; and left him to wonder, at leisure, what the evening of life would have been like without her.

Before three days were over, he had cause to bless her obstinacy from the depth of his heart.

A revival of symptoms involved a revival of specialists, who probed him and pulled long faces and vexed his sceptical soul — and finally deputed his old friend Dr. Farrar to set before him the fruits of their united wisdom.

It amounted to a choice between dragging on a few months longer, with the help of ameliorations, or taking the risk of a serious operation on the chance of returning to normal health, though scarcely normal strength. Lord Avonleigh listened, with his air of polite, impersonal interest, to the uninviting alternatives.

"A very fair average risk — I take it?" was all he said; and Dr. Farrar reluctantly admitted as much.

"Of course," he added, "we would wait till you are a little stronger."

"Very considerate! Personally, I would rather take my chance and be done with it."

Farrar cleared his throat. He had a large fund of human nature and a real affection for his difficult, distinguished patient.

"There you come up against the medical conscience," he said kindly. "Myself, I think your chances are good. But — the conditions are rather obscure. Perhaps" — he hesitated — "you would like to think the matter over?"

Lord Avonleigh's quick ear caught the note of fellow-feeling. He dropped his mask of stoicism and looked straight at his old friend.

"My dear Farrar — I believe you are more upset about it than I am. But I prefer prompt decisions and — I incline to take the risk. The deuce of it is" — he rubbed his chin and looked really distressed for the first time — "there will be the world's fuss. And it's the worst thing possible for my wife."

Dr. Farrar nodded. "She is not — very fit for such a strain I should strongly advise her being elsewhere. Your sister —?"

"Oh, she's all right. And of course — now things are settled, I go straight back to Avonleigh."

At that the good doctor's brows ran half up his forehead. "My dear Sir! In this weather — impossible!"

But remonstrance and arguments broke like waves against the rock of Lord Avonleigh's resolve. After a stormy five minutes, Farrar saw that he was simply exhausting his patient and making no headway whatever.

"Take any precautions you please," said this most unmanageable of men. "Ambulance — or whatever — so long as I get there. Good Heavens, man, I'm facing one big risk. What matter another? If my time is up — I'm ready. But I refuse to die in a Nursing Home or a furnished house. Now — please let me be."

He pulled himself up and they shook hands in silence.

"By the way — about my wife," he added, as Farrar turned to go. "It would be a real kindness if you would make things clear to her — You get plenty of practice in your profession?"

"A good deal too much," said Farrar; and left him alone face to face with the Immensities.

He needed respite: and for half an hour he had it. Then the sound of his wife's footstep drew him back to the Trivialities, that drag the skirts of Tragedy in the dust. He steeled himself to endure them. He knew so painfully well the kind of thing she would say — words, looks, tones —

That dreary prescience is not among the least of married miseries, when the years have brought a deadening of familiarity and the lamp of love has flickered out for lack of oil.

She came — with every appearance of distress partly subdued: the flush of tears on her lids, a moist handkerchief in the hand pressed against her heart. It was a familiar attitude — a mute appeal for consideration.

As he rose she swept gracefully forward and laid her free hand on his arm.

"Oh, Evan — *such* a shock! So dreadful! And Dr. Farrar says you've settled it all. I should have thought you might have waited — to talk it over —"

"It seems to be Hobson's choice, my dear," he said gently, patting her hand.

"I don't believe it. *I* would have more opinions. You have always been so strong. I'm *sure* you could pull through naturally — without their horrid knives. They have simply got a mania, nowadays, for cutting people up —"

"In the interests of science, Esther!" A half smile twitched his lips. "I believe they do it very neatly, and the victim is mercifully not upset by — the look of things."

"How *can* you talk like that — almost joke about it?"

"Have you never found it necessary to laugh — lest you should cry?"

She gazed at him with wide eyes, mildly reproachful. "I may be dense, Evan, but I have never been hysterical."

He charitably supposed she had misheard him; and answered with unmoved countenance: "No. That is an ailment you have happily overlooked." A pause. "You will take Farrar's advice — about London?"

"I suppose so." She pressed the wet handkerchief closer to her heart. "I couldn't stand being on the spot. But still — so far away — I shall die of suspense —"

"A telephone message might reach you in time to avert the calamity."

"*There* you are again!" She straightened herself and drew apart from him. "Can't you be serious — over anything? Because I control myself, I get no sympathy. You don't realize how shaken I am. It could hardly have come at a more unfortunate moment."

"Very careless of me," he said with grave courtesy. "God knows I hate the fuss of it all. And if it upsets you so — well — I'd as soon leave it to Nature and take my chance. A few months — a few years — no great matter, after all. Naturally one would prefer the years. But they won't guarantee —"

"Evan — *stop!*" The tears started and she caught his arm. "It's too horrible . . . when you put it that way. We won't talk of it any more."

"That's better," he said, with relief unfeigned. "If we mean to go through with it, Esther, we may as well put a brave face on things and not 'anticipate the past.'" (She had never been intimate with the immortal Malaprop, and she gave him up in despair.) "On the whole, I'm sound, and we'll take it for granted that I shall survive their delicate attentions."

His eyes wandered to the window and he sighted a familiar figure swinging down the path; Socrates, gravely self-important, trotting to heel.

"Hullo! Here comes the boy —"

She heard the vexatious note of welcome in his voice and drew back with her air of dignity aggrieved.

"I'll leave you. I would only be *de trop.*"

Halfway to the door she turned. "If he brings that dog in, please remind him that I dislike dogs in the house. There are marks on the hall carpet. Other people's things — one can't be too careful. I've spoken once. But he never attends to *my* wishes."

Lord Avonleigh said nothing. He sank into his chair with an audible sigh and sat staring into the fire. . . .

Three minutes later Derek — duly accompanied by a muddy-booted Philosopher — entered the room. This time Lord Avonleigh did not rise; nor did he guess how the bitterness, which his wife invariably stirred in him, shadowed his welcoming smile. But Derek missed no least indication of his mood.

"Dad — what *is* it?" he asked sharply. "Bad news?"

"Yes, old boy. You have quick eyes. Sit down. Let us get it over."

Derek set a small chair near the fire and held out his hands to the blaze. He maintained that position, while his father told him all there was to tell. Only an occasional movement of his lips, or of the muscles in his throat, revealed the pain he could not express. Lord Avonleigh's eyes noted and understood; and his dumb, lonely heart yearned towards this son, so long overlooked, so peculiarly his own; himself almost, in replica, but for an occasional minor trait that transfused the whole into a fresh personality.

"There is at least *one* consolation," he concluded in his even voice. "I go straight back to Avonleigh."

Derek nodded in profound comprehension.

"But isn't it — the journey — a bit of a risk?"

"If you were in my shoes, Derek — wouldn't you take it?"

"Ten times over."

"Exactly. Farrar thinks Mother will be better elsewhere. But Aunt Marion goes with me."

Derek looked round quickly, all his constraint gone. "Dad mayn't *we* come too — after the christening show? Gay is a born nurse. She would love to help — in any way."

Lord Avonleigh leant forward and laid a hand on his knee. "The price of a good woman is above rubies."

"You can throw in pearls and diamonds, if it comes to that," murmured Derek, smiling at the fire. "And — you hate strangers around."

"I do. It will cheer me inexpressibly. I should have hesitated to suggest it. You are still in the blissful stage."

Derek passed a hand across his eyes. "No more blissful stage for me, till *you* are on the safe side — of all this. And I've been longing to take her there."

His father sighed. "I wish it were under happier auspices."

Then they fell to talking of Avonleigh; and forgot themselves and the Encroaching Shadow —

It was not till Derek rose to go, and Socrates emerged from under his knees, that Lord Avonleigh remembered his wife's parting injunction.

"By the way," he said, a wicked twinkle in his eye: "Mother bade me remind you that she disapproves of four-footed philosophers, who don't wipe their boots on the mat. Other people's carpets, you know —!"

Derek looked distressed. "Oh, I'm awfully sorry. I forgot. May we bring him to Avonleigh?"

"Of course. *My* carpets will be honoured!"

Derek stood silent a moment. Then — boldly, obeying the impulse of his heart — he laid a hand on his father's shoulder, stooped and kissed his hair.

Lord Avonleigh simply looked up at him. "God bless you!" he said under his breath.

And Derek, with a painful lump in his throat, walked quickly away.

CHAPTER VII

*Alpha and Omega, sadness and mirth,
The springing music and its wasting breath —
The fairest things in life are Death and Birth,
For Birth hath, in itself, the germ of Death —
For they are twain, yet one — and Death is Birth.*

FRANCIS THOMPSON

LORD AVONLEIGH survived the journey. Furthermore, he insisted on surviving a good many other satisfying activities over which medical science shook a pessimistic head. For two short weeks he lived and moved in a strange exaltation of spirit; a blessed, intimate reunion with his own fragment of England, that was fibre of his fibre — his hold on the future, his link with a great and honourable past. On the soft South coast, bereft of mental stimulus, his strength had flagged. Here — with Derek for his constant companion, with plans for the future to inspire, if not to achieve — his mind amazingly renewed its vigour and defied the secret protests of its outworn comrade — the body.

None of them — not even Marion — guessed that he was deliberately living on his capital. Sceptic though he was, in the grain, he knew unerringly that Farrar had told him the truth; that outside the circle of light in which he moved — resolutely, but with waning strength — the Encroaching Shadow bided its time. . . .

The clouds had emptied themselves of snow; and a spell of bland wintry sunshine made many things possible that had else been sternly vetoed. His daily drive gave him once again the desire of his eyes — the woods and fields and farms of Avonleigh, the friendly faces of his own people; and the sincerity of their inarticulate welcome moved him to a point that bordered on pain. It provoked the thought: "When I am gone, will all

this wither away — the personal allegiance, the living link with the land?"

There lay the core of his tragedy — not dread of the Unknown; nor even the bitter pang of parting; but lack of faith in the son who would come after him.

For this cause, above all, he clung to life, and Avonleigh, with all the tenacity that was in him. Aided by the faithful Malcolm, he laid the foundations of schemes he had thought out, in leisure moments, thousands of miles away. He made meticulous enquiries into Karl's work and saw that it was good. Once, Van came down, for the night, armed with affectionate messages from his mother, who was laid up with her heart and unfit to travel: — a strangely subdued Van, out of his element with Aunt Marion and never quite at his ease with Gay. He spent a long afternoon with Lord Avonleigh, chiefly devoted to local affairs; and travelled unreluctantly back to Town with some food for anxiety in his mind and a twinge of jealousy in his heart.

That twinge would have been sharper had he guessed that to Derek alone — in these strange days of seclusion from the world-storm — did Lord Avonleigh express the deep and troubled thoughts that stirred in him, with a rare unreserve engendered by more than an impulse of fatherly affection and the haunting sense of Eternity knocking at the door.

In the small hours of a sleepless night of pain, a thought had come to him; as it were a crumb of consolation let fall by the Unseen Hand that held the sword. To Van, worthy or unworthy, must pass the material heritage; but there remained a heritage of the spirit. His hopes for the future of the race, his invincible faith in the qualities that had made England great, the standard of true aristocracy, of high unpurchasable service to the State — these gifts he could hand on to the son in whom he detected the dumb, inveterate idealism of his race; a quality no less British, in essence, than Van's innate distrust of ideas, lest they upset his mental status and shift him out of his groove.

Derek was already imbued with the main articles of his own creed — for the individual, the aristocratic standard, in what-

ever walk of life; for the nation, responsible leadership in place of the crowd's indeterminate swaying and the bitter venom of party strife. But, could the boy long continue to hold a faith so starkly opposed to the shifting, swirling spirit of these times? Generations of Blounts had lived and died in it. For himself — it was the immortal part of him. He could not bear that it should perish with his bones.

Since his return he and Derek had come very close together, in their inarticulate fashion. It would be an effort well worth making to draw him closer still. With his happier marriage and the stronger human strain in him, he might yet achieve those things that his father had missed; might yet play a noble part in the renascence of mind and spirit that springs from the material holocaust of war, as flame springs from the ruins of a great conflagration.

To a nature deeply imbued with reserve, the way of self-revealing was hard; but Derek was quick to catch the drift of his father's desire; and — for once in his life — quick to come forward halfway.

So, in the long evenings — when Lord Avonleigh was ruthlessly consigned to bed — Derek would sit and smoke with him for an hour or more; would pave the way to personal talk with a shy hint or question. And he rarely failed of a reward: — fragmentary glimpses of his father's boyhood; of ideals that had survived, of illusions that had withered, of ambitions unfulfilled; glimpses of his own diffident, searching spirit in the father whose speech and actions had always seemed so invincibly assured: sadder glimpses — gleaned from things left unsaid — of his mother's curiously blighting effect on the life and character of a man whom he would have judged singularly impervious to feminine influences.

But mainly their talk was of larger themes. And through it all ran, like a refrain, his father's belief in the responsibility of the privileged, in the individual as the world's true lever; his unspoken charge to the individual of his own creation: "I hand on the torch of my faith to you. Keep it burning."

Never, while he lived, would Derek forget that nightly

vision of him, propped on snowy pillows, in his green quilted smoking-jacket, framed by the long, flowered curtains and throne-like canopy of the great bed: his keen pale face wonderfully illumined when his subject caught hold of him and all irksome constraints were swept away.

On one such evening Derek found him fingering a long strip of paper; but they smoked and talked for nearly ten minutes before his father, after a thoughtful pause, held it out to him.

"This . . . may interest you," he said, with a hesitancy that was almost shyness. "I spent a profitable morning over it, while you two were out."

At the head of the slip was written, "My Legacy of books for Derek." It was an exhaustive list, mainly historical — English, Italian, and French. Derek scanned it with a full heart. Words were hopelessly inadequate —

He looked up, at last, and found there was really no need of them.

Lord Avonleigh said: "I'm glad it pleases you, old boy."

And Derek said simply: "I am overwhelmed. I suppose — Van won't object?"

"Van has no voice in that matter."

Then, to dispel their mutual embarrassment, he took the list and ticked off with his pencil certain favourites: "Gardiner's 'Charles I,' Lecky's 'Democracy and Liberty,' Houssaye on the Government of Venice. Amazingly instructive, in the light of recent events. Venice fooled by the Turks, in the sixteenth century, reads exactly like a forecast of England and Germany in the twentieth. The same unwieldy councils, the same irresolution and delays. Richelieu's 'Testament Politique.' Not sufficiently well known. Three centuries old — yet his principles of Government have scarcely been bettered. Call your State Republic, Democracy — what you will — the essential fact remains that human safety and progress hang ultimately on wise personal direction. It is the great lesson the Many have still to learn — and I fear their skulls are thick — that they can only realize their higher aspirations through the

guidance and co-operation of the super-capable few. And I say emphatically, the fewer the better. . . .”

He paused, frowning at his own weakness; smiling at the concern in Derek's eyes. “Prophecy is mostly waste of breath. But I will hazard a guess that the world's history for the next fifty years will be largely determined by the nation or nations that uphold the true aristocratic principle and bring forth the ruler-spirit — the Great Man. I have left you some notes of mine on that subject. Make friends with Richelieu, Derek.”

“And then —?” Derek queried. “When I have digested all this. Would you like me to enter public life?”

“Yes — if they cleanse the temple and cast out the money-changers and stop tampering with the House of Lords. Bad enough as it is. But where the devil should we be now if it really *had* been ‘scrapped’ in the day of ‘scrappings’? When that struggle is renewed, I fear Van will not be found among the ‘Die-Hards’! He would vote for painless extinction rather than prolong the effort of fighting for his life. And I verily believe” — Lord Avonleigh set his lips, as if combating a spasm of pain — “I would rise from my grave and fight in his stead —”

Again that spasm across his face. He leaned back breathing heavily: and Derek, in an agony of fear, summoned his aunt. She arrived to find him white and shaken and her brother in a dead faint.

“I expect he has been overdoing it,” she said, her face set and stern. “Ring up Dr. Farrar at once.”

And Derek, feeling miserable and vaguely guilty, went without a word.

A week later he sat alone over the fire in the great library. Its three tall windows let in fugitive rays of sunshine that glinted on polished brass and wood and laid a bright, unheeded benediction on Derek's bowed head.

It was a lofty room, rather severely furnished; but a human warmth and friendliness radiated from the prevailing tone of golden brown in curtains and carpet and the leather-bound books that climbed three walls from floor to ceiling. There is

no friendlier colour than golden-brown. It softened the austerity of Lord Avonleigh's room, as the smile in his eyes softened the austerity of his face. Because the room was imbued with his presence, they practically lived in it now — they three, who so loved him and had come so near to losing him, since the day of dread silence and suspense when, for nearly two hours, he had been under the surgeon's knife. His great oak desk stood open, deplorably empty and tidy. His foot-muff and pipe-rack seemed mutely to ask — "Will he come again?" And Derek's lonely figure occupied the great chair by the fire, that in far-off days he used to call, with bated breath, 'the judgment throne.'

He was leaning forward, his head between his hands, staring into the flameless heart of the fire that seemed a blurred smear, like a wound, because his eyes were heavy with tears. He was thinking — thinking; hoping, with an intensity amounting to a prayer, that the strain of those muted days — when his father's life hung by a thread — was gone, never to return. Through such days, the spirit, rising to its full height, drags the unresisting body in its wake. Only when the grip is relaxed, the brain looks back and marvels — "How did one live through it all?"

This morning Derek knew how desperately tired he was, how narrowly he had escaped an almost unbearable loss.

In the last twenty-four hours matters had taken a more hopeful turn. There had been refreshing sleep; and to-day a wonderful rally of strength. So he had leisure to think; to realize what Gabrielle's mere presence had been to him in those dark hours, when he could see no light at all except the steadfast light of love and courage in her eyes. Calm, controlled, dependable, she had taken her turn at nursing with the Inevitable Stranger; had won Aunt Marion's confidence — and established herself, more securely than ever, in his father's heart. In her own inimitable fashion she had simply mothered them all —

Two days after the operation, when hope was at the lowest ebb, Van had been sent for. He had arrived looking bewildered

and wretched; and it struck Derek, even in the midst of his own pain, how curiously out of place he seemed in a serious setting. It was as if tragedy oppressed him, even while it hurt. Frankly, his departure had been a relief. They were so profoundly united in their grief — those three: and Van seemed a being from another world. The day before yesterday Mark had come over. Another sensation altogether. Mark, for all his present happiness and keen joy of life, was not out of his element in the depths. It is a touchstone of character. . . .

The door-handle turned softly. He started and looked up. It was Gabrielle in her hospital blue: no colour in her cheeks and violet shadows under her eyes. He would have risen, but her lifted hand forbade: and the next moment she was beside him, half reclining on the bearskin, her head against his knee. There was a brief silence.

"Very tired, are you, my darling?" he asked.

His hand, that rested on her head, slid down to her cheek and he found it wet with tears.

Smothering a sob, she drew herself up, stirred the fire and looked into his face. The flames betrayed him; and her smile flashed out.

"Foolish of us! I've just left him with Aunt Marion and the *Morning Post*. So happy. Quite convinced that America is going to justify his faith in her and join hands with us at last. And now —" She rose, discarding weariness and tears. "We are to go out — you and I. Aunt Marion's orders."

"I'm willing. You need it," he said, tracing with his finger tip the shadows under her eyes. "I can't have you knocking up. There *are* others."

"But he so beautifully prefers it to be me. And I'm only tired; not knocked up. It's — Something Else —"

He looked deep into her eyes — and her cheeks were pale no longer.

As on that day in the forest, he held out his arms, and gathered her close, without a word, without a kiss, and with something of the same shy intensity —

His first words, when they came, moved her more deeply than any lover's phrase in the language. "You must let me tell Father. It will put new life into him."

Her arm stole round his neck. They kissed and stood apart again; profoundly content, yet still a little incredulous over the simple, primal event that never — for true lovers — quite loses its quality of miracle.

"Now — get your things on; and — if you really love me, you might look in on old Con."

"*If — !*" She was gone in a flash; and returned reasonably soon — from the feminine standpoint — in a long fur coat and cap.

"Did you see her?" he asked as they went out into the pale sunshine.

"I did more than see her! She 'drew me into feminine depths,'" quoted Gabrielle, who knew her Meredith quite as well as her Browning. "Where are we going?"

"The Park — my beech tree. I used to take the grand old chap all my miseries when I was a troublesome, lonely kid, always in hot water. Now I want to take him my joy — both my joys!" he added, with a light in his eyes that she had not seen there since the day of the operation.

That evening Lord Avonleigh was sufficiently himself again to be unmanageable — a sign of blessed augury. He submitted, perforce, to his after-dinner rest; no company, no talking. Then, carefully propped with pillows, he demanded Derek and a cigarette. He was given both, with a stern injunction to keep placid and avoid argument; for the strain on his heart had been severe.

"Derek and I never argue," he said gravely. "We find flat contradiction more stimulating!"

It lifted Marion's tired heart to hear once again the faint, familiar note of mockery. So they left him; and as the door closed, he let out an ungracious sigh of relief.

"Sit down, old boy. It's nice to get a whiff of your pipe again, and it's good — just for an hour or so — to be quit of the

women. They are beyond compare. But — occasionally — you understand!"

"Rather," agreed Derek, drawing his chair close to the bed. "I used to feel that way badly."

They smoked awhile; Derek surreptitiously scrutinizing his father's face — the features sharpened and pale as a waxen effigy, the strained line of the mouth that spoke of pain stoically endured. He wanted to tell his news, but felt absurdly shame-faced over the simple and natural prospect of adding his mite to the sum total of England's population.

He managed it at last, with an engaging air of detachment as if he were commenting on the weather.

Lord Avonleigh's brows worked vigorously, a trick of his when surprised and pleased.

"Good," he said, nodding approval and smiling at the mixture of awkwardness and unconscious pride in Derek's tone. "Excellent. And — very surprising, eh? Queer fellows, aren't we? It's an achievement we can scarcely escape. Yet we take as much pride in it as if we had conquered a city."

"After all" — Derek shyly excused himself — "it means — a new individual . . ."

"Quite so. And *we* believe in the individual. It also means" he added on a deeper note of feeling — "that, with any luck, our name goes on, even if Van fails in his elementary duty — to Avonleigh."

It was not the first remark of its kind: and the instinct of brotherly allegiance, tugging at Derek's heart, impelled him to say what he could.

"Poor old Van — had rather a bad knock this summer."

"Turned down? She wouldn't have him?" A wicked gleam of amusement flickered through Lord Avonleigh's surprise. "Is that official? D'you know the lady?"

And Derek saw he had let himself in — also Van.

"I do." A pause. "She — very oddly — happened to prefer me!"

"Good God! Confoundedly awkward position." He mused awhile on Derek's twofold revelation. Then: "Poor Van!

Two knocks in succession — and they have not been his daily bread. If I feel fit enough to-morrow, we must wire for him. Perhaps I have been too hard — failed to make allowances. At a crisis even the best of us are at the mercy of temperament. And if I have suffered from his, no doubt he has suffered from mine. I am counting on you, Derek, to stand by him — and Avonleigh. He won't live here, if I know him. But Malcolm has promised to carry on all I have most at heart. Uphold him as far as you can. And — if there is an Afterwards . . . be sure my spirit will be with you —”

It was a few seconds before Derek could command his voice.

“But, Dad,” he said at last, “you are going to carry on yourself a long while yet.”

Lord Avonleigh shook his head.

“I may hang on a bit because my spirit clings so obstinately to this place — to you three, who have lightened my hours of pain,” he said very quietly. “But I have lived my life. Let the women cling to hope, if it comforts them. You are man enough to look truth in the face. The sands have run too low. Van's reign has already begun —”

When the women came in to bid him good-night, Gabrielle's hand was retained a moment. Then he drew her down and kissed her cheek.

“God bless you, my dear,” he said, barely above his breath. “You have made me very happy.” And she, blushing a little, touched his forehead with her lips that were cool and soft as rose leaves.

As for Marion Blount — if there lurked in her soul a tremor of foreknowledge, she gave no sign. She understood her brother, who had been her all, as few wives come to understand the men they marry.

“Derek has taken over charge,” he told her. “And I'm not going to let him off yet.”

Her attempt at remonstrance was nipped in the bud. “Don't fuss, Molly. There's that luckless woman on duty next door. Wish she'd go to bed too.”

"She'll do nothing of the sort," said Marion in her best autocratic manner. "Not too late, mind," she added with a warning frown at Derek — and withdrew from the field.

Again they smoked a long while in companionable silence. Gabrielle, carrying on the torch of life, had set the thoughts of both reaching out towards the future. Presently their eyes met and they smiled.

"The glory of going on — and still to be," said Lord Avonleigh, as it were answering Derek's thought. "Curious the store we set by it. If not the individual — then the race. The last is the only form that we of little faith can feel reasonably sure of." His gaze searched the eyes of his son. "Do you — feel reasonably sure of any other?"

Derek was silent a moment. It was as if his father had reached out to him for help; — and he had little or none to give. Only that strange sensation on the night that was nearly his last. Difficult to speak of: yet he made the attempt; frowning with the effort at self-expression.

"Not reasonably sure, perhaps; but — unreasonably so — since last year. One night, I was so weak — I felt as if I couldn't hang together. Part of me seemed to be slipping away — not into darkness, but into a flood of light and colour. Too vague to explain; but it was extraordinarily vivid and — somehow, extraordinarily comforting. Of course it doesn't amount to anything. Just an experience. But it left — a queer kind of conviction. One felt — one could trust — the Unknown —!"

"Thank you, Derek," his father said gravely, and drew in a laboured breath. "After all — our unreasoned convictions are the bread of life. Mercifully I can boast a few. I'm afraid I've taken precious little pains to hand them on to you two; and then I slang poor old Van for being — what *I* helped to make him! Cultivate your son as well as your garden, Derek — and cultivate him early. We take a son for granted — eh?" He smiled, as at some thought of his own. "I would give a great deal to see him — to know what sort of a world he will grow up into."

"An International paradise — the soldier an extinct species?" suggested Derek with a twinkle.

"God forbid! A World State, as a pious aspiration, is all very well. But — in my opinion — it is not practical politics. For vital progress, there must be manifold, individual nations and there must be conflict. One can trust human nature for that. For the rest, if it is true that nations live greatly through the spirits of their great dead, our own million dead in this War are the best hope we have of national salvation. Those who have given all *are* redeemers, after their kind — the country's aristocracy of character and courage —"

He spoke with kindling eye and quickened breathing. A faint tinge of colour crept into his cheek and surreptitiously he pressed a hand against his side.

"Dad — be careful!" Derek urged, dreading reaction from this sudden spurt of vigour, yet craving all — and more — while there was time.

Lord Avonleigh frowned. To the strong man weakness is less endurable than pain. "That stuff — on the dressing-table — quick. Thank you — thank you."

He sank back on his pillows, exhausted, but relieved.

"Don't be alarmed, old boy," he said with a wan smile; for Derek could not keep the fear out of his eyes.

"Shall I fetch Nurse?" he asked.

Lord Avonleigh waved an impatient hand.

"You can do more for me than any nurse or doctor by just — sitting there."

Derek, wholly willing, if only half convinced, obeyed; and Lord Avonleigh, watching him with a curious intentness, lit a fresh cigarette.

"I must go slow — that's all," he said in his natural voice. "But the thoughts . . . come crowding . . . now I have no strength to utter them: thoughts of the future beating like waves on my brain. And I must pass on . . . not knowing . . . how this tremendous affair will end. War breeds revolution. Will all the refinements and nobilities we have stood for be swept overboard by the loud voice and the full purse and the

pushing elbow? Some say they will — that our order is passing —” The old mocking smile gleamed in his eye. ““They say”—let them say!” My answer is Renan’s—‘*Toute civilisation est d’origine aristocratique.*’ A genuine aristocracy of brains and breeding is vital to national health. The sane mind for the sound body. The painful question is, Have we preserved an aristocracy worthy to survive? And can a general orgy of kicking over the traces call itself Civilization? The War has revived duty and discipline and heroism. But one fears the swing of the pendulum. Should the worst happen and the crowd prevail, much will hang on the courageous few of your generation — Think of me, Derek, and keep the flag flying.”

Again he took a deep breath. The flame of his spirit was burning up all too fast the little fuel that remained.

Derek, beset by dumbness, could only murmur: “I promise,” and hold out his hand.

Lord Avonleigh grasped it with surprising force.

“I’m not dogmatizing, old boy. I am only speaking my mind — while I can — because I have great hopes of you. I have lived—I admit it—too much behind closed doors. I have held aloof from public life because of my distaste for the mere squabble of personalities, the vulgar scramble for place and power. I admit it is an aristocratic weakness — that tendency to stand aside and shrug. The streak is not so strong in you. Modified, perhaps, by the social conscience of young Oxford! And as I said, you were not afraid to soil your dream with the mud of life —”

“All the same,” Derek found courage to say, “you don’t know how often I have repented — regretted the chance I lost of working with you — running after vague abstractions — neglecting the duty — and privilege on my doorstep —”

For reward, he had his father’s kindest smile; but the spurious spurt of vigour was gone.

“Well, don’t do any more repenting — or regretting. It’s misplaced energy at the best. I confess I was disappointed at the time. But it opened my eyes to you — and to other things. And — in the end I approved . . . I understood . . .”

His voice trailed off; and he lay quiet, contemplating the steadfast profile of the son who had not failed him. The sands were running very low. Cold fingers were stealing round his heart. In his utter weakness, the pain of parting smote him like a physical pang. Too well he understood the boy's silence. It stirred the deepest wells of feeling; and moved him to attempt some inadequate expression of the love he bore him.

One of Derek's hands rested on the quilt. Lord Avonleigh — after an instant of painful hesitation — enclosed it in his own. "I am grateful to you and . . . proud of you . . . my son!" was all he managed to say.

But, for Derek, it was everything. Tears blinded him. He could only return the slow, strong pressure of his father's hand.

For both, the moment was weighted with foreknowledge of the end; and, in Lord Avonleigh's brain, something seemed to snap. The master will — that had held body and soul together till all was said — relaxed its grip. His head dropped limply back on the pillow. His lips moved — but no sound came —

Derek's dumbness fled. "Father — Father!" he cried, fear and entreaty in his low tone.

No response from the still face. Mechanically he thought: "*Something* must be done!" He tried to release his hand. The thin fingers closed on it with a convulsive grip that struck a chill all through him. The friendly, human quality of a few minutes ago was gone . . .

Hurriedly he slipped his free hand under the coat. In the region of the heart no flutter — none in the pulse; and over the still face crept the unnamable change — the dignity, the serenity; as if an angel's wing in passing had smoothed away all lines of pain and strain —

And Derek knew that he was alone. Van's reign had indeed begun —

Useless to call the others. They, too, were tired. They could do nothing. And he could not endure another presence. Nor could he bear forcibly to withdraw his hand. Impossible to shift his gaze from the waxen stillness of the face on the

pillow — the high nobility of the brow, the dominant nose, with its sensitive nostril, the strong indent between under-lip and chin. There he was. And yet — he was not.

For a moment, incredulity numbered sensation. Later on — the pain would begin —

Tears that had grown cold on his lashes trickled slowly down his cheeks. Stooping, he kissed his father's forehead. It had the faint warmth of life; and, at the contact, realization smote him. With a choking sob, he dropped on his knees and bowed his head on the hand locked in his own —

For a timeless spell he knelt thus: motionless, as the dead, but for the long-drawn breaths that shuddered through him. Thoughts and feelings drifted by, unheeded, and merged in the overwhelming ironic sense of loss . . .

And suddenly, like a star in darkness, gleamed the face of Gabrielle with the light of her great news in her eyes. No cessation anywhere — no break in the endless chain. His father's spirit drifting into the infinite: and emerging unseen, from the infinite, the new spark of life that would one day be his son.

'The glory of going on — and still to be.' The ear of his brain caught the very tones of his father's voice. But, in the succession of endless to-morrows, the clear memory of it would fade, though every word spoken in this last hour remained stamped upon his heart. The scales of his being hung poised, as it were, between the sense of birth and the sense of death: grief, strangely shot through with joy; joy, darkly shadowed with grief. Confused longings and aspirations surged through him, wave on wave; soared almost to the region of prayer . . .

The utter stillness seemed stealthily to deepen and envelop him. His brain became acutely sensitive to the ceaseless whisper of the clock on the mantelpiece, the intermittent whisper of loosened coals in the grate.

Strangely, imperceptibly the stillness, that was mere quiet, blossomed into the stillness of a Hidden Reality. Though his body knelt there, desolate, Something told him he was not alone. A mere breath, it seemed, would dissolve the veil

that withheld his eyes from seeing, his ears from hearing. But the veil was not dissolved . . .

Only there stole into his mind a deep, commanding sense of some Inner Stability that endured through all the striving, evolving forms of life; something independent of the material envelope, informing it, breaking through it into ever new marvels of self-expression: the symbols and shapes eternally changing; the Inner Essence eternally pressing outward and upward — ‘the glory of going on — and still to be —’

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